

interzone

OCTOBER 2000

NUMBER 160

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New stories by

Barrington J. Bayley

Chris Beckett

Jean-Claude Dunyach

Liz Williams

Zoran Zivkovic

Interviews with

Ben Jeapes

Steven Gould &

Laura J. Mixon



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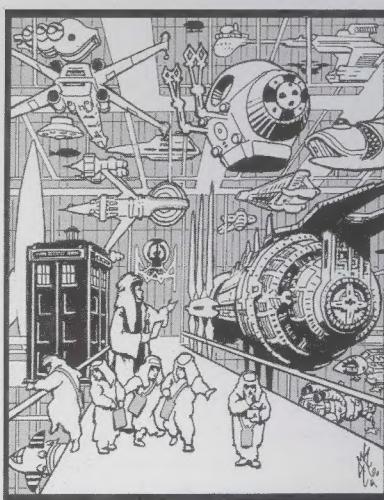
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

OCTOBER 2000

Number 160

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Dear Editors:

Can anyone please explain Robert A. Heinlein's politics? Various issues of *Interzone* (stories, letters, articles) seem to imply inside knowledge of this. Or perhaps this is just presumption on the part of your various contributors?

I am not an avid fan, but find his novels in general to be about idealized heroes surviving in harsh political landscapes. His lack of women and other "minorities" in his earlier novels is typical for his generation of writers. His later use of female characters I never found believable. But most of his main characters seemed to reflect what he wanted to be in a man (independent strength maybe) and what he wanted to see in a woman (sexual availability perhaps).

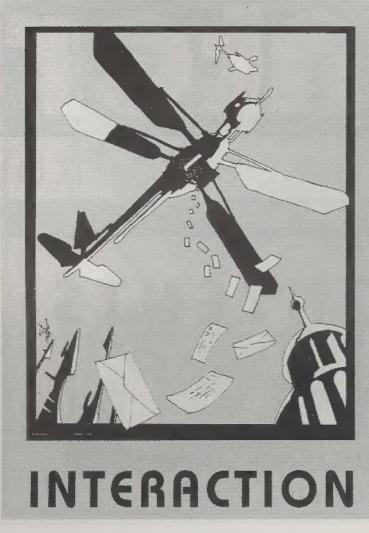
Anyway, this prejudice I have detected in your magazine pushed me into planning to write this letter and to do a little quick research of what stories by him I have read. So I looked on Amazon.com, where I found *Tramp Royale* by him, written in the 1950s and published after his death. It is about a world tour taken by Heinlein and his wife at the time, and I feel should reflect his attitudes on life and people in general. I have therefore ordered a copy. Incidentally, Amazon didn't seem to have much by him compared to, say, Arthur C Clarke. A reflection of a general prejudice, or of the fact that Clarke is still alive? I don't know.

Changing the subject. Can anyone tell me where I can find anything by Donald Kingsbury? I am rereading my nearly worn-out copy of *Geta* and would like to know what else by him is available.

Pam Powlesland

pampowles@hotmail.com

Editor: Robert A. Heinlein's politics is a subject of endless fascination to some critics, but there can be no definitive answer to your question. In the 1930s, he was a staunch supporter of the left-wing writer Upton Sinclair's "End Poverty in California" campaign. He helped edit Sinclair's political newspaper, and actually ran for office as a liberal Democrat. (Since Sinclair defined himself as a socialist, it's perhaps not unfair to say that Heinlein was a socialist too.) An excellent, well-documented article on the subject of Heinlein's involvement in left-wing California politics is "Ham and Eggs and Heinlein" by the late Thomas Perry (Monad no. 3, September 1993, edited by Damon Knight for Pulphouse Publishing, Eugene, Oregon). After failing to win elected office, however, Heinlein abandoned active politics and decided to become a science-fiction writer — this was in 1938. During and immediately after World War II his political views seem to have swung sharply to the right, and remained



INTERACTION

there. For the views expressed (or expressed by his characters) in his later novels, particularly the more opinionated novels from *Starship Troopers* (1959) onwards, Heinlein has been labelled many things, ranging from "libertarian" (and even "anarchist") to "fascist." It's an ongoing debate.

As for Donald Kingsbury, he is a Canadian author of mature years (born 1929), who began publishing sf books fairly late in life. His principal work apart from the novel you mention, *Geta* (1982; known as *Courtship Rite in the USA*), is entitled *The Moon Goddess and the Son* (1986). You may be able to hunt down a copy of the latter via the specialist sf bookdealers who advertise each month in this magazine's Small Ads. Another book worth looking for is the original anthology *Man-Kzin Wars IV* (1991), edited by Larry Niven, which contains a complete short novel by Kingsbury, "The Survivor" (since which, I'm afraid, he seems to have written very little).

The Hashish Man?

Dear Editors:

Nick Gevers's review of *Time and the Gods* in *IZ* 158 has an aside speculating that hashish might have contributed to Lord Dunsany's fantasy visions. The self-proclaimed black magician Aleister Crowley knew his drugs and thought differently. In 1910 he sent Dunsany a fan letter praising the short "The Hashish Man," with reservations: "I see you only know it (hashish) by hearsay not by experience. You have not confused time and space as the true eater does." Tactfully ignoring the naughty magazines "The Great Beast" had enclosed with his letter, Dunsany replied that the strongest drug he took was tea. (Source: Mark Amory, *Lord Dunsany: A Biography*, 1972)

David Langford

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Taking Exception

Dear Editors:

I am writing to take exception to some comments in Chris Gilmore's reviews of James Alan Gardner's *Hunted* and Nancy Kress's *Improbability Moon* in *IZ* 158. In the former, speculating on the application of the Leagues of People's Law under which "[a]ny murderer, or anyone who attempts to cross interstellar space with murderous intent, is automatically killed" in a real world in which, say, North America and Arabia were in different systems, he suggests that "Desert Storm could not have happened, so Kuwait, and by now Saudi Arabia, the UAE etc., would lie under the brutal heel of Saddam Hussein — a prospect from which only Sir Edward Heath could derive satisfaction."

Even if one accepts the rather unlikely premise that Saddam Hussein does have the territorial ambitions the Western powers and their handmaiden media ascribe to him (remember, he wasn't at all like that when he was America's best friend in the region and neighbouring Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini was that year's Darth Vader), there are probably 250,000 (and rising) Iraqi civilians murdered by US and UK forces in their ongoing attacks and by the trade embargoes they enforce, who would probably have been quite grateful for such a division between themselves and the West. The majority of Yugoslavians, regardless of ethnic origin and affiliation, would also probably value such a shield from US, EU and NATO aggression, as would many Latin American, African and Asian peoples. (A more interesting thought-experiment might arise from contemplating the effects of amending such a law to include arms dealers.)

In the latter review, Gilmore compounds his unsavoury opinions by suggesting that "[d]eeply strange, and deeply dangerous" is a sufficient pretext for fighting a war but not for justifying a fictional war in a novel. This is surely the wrong way around, but Gilmore offers not a trace of irony to redeem himself — not particularly surprising considering his earlier caricatures of Saddam Hussein and the Second Gulf War.

If your reviewers are going to make a habit of ornamenting their reviews with such analogies, metaphors and examples, please could you try to ensure that they are not so ill-informed.

Mark Bould

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Chris Gilmore comments:

"Mr Bould seems unwilling to accept that Saddam had territorial ambitions, despite his annexing of the eastern

side of the Shatt-al-Arab from Iran (at the cost of perhaps a million dead over nine years), and despite his annexing of the Sultanate of Kuwait by means of undeclared war. How much proof does he need? Granted, the western powers tended to fall into the common 'a bastard, but our bastard,' mistake when Iran and Iraq were at war, but by then that situation no longer obtained; even if it still obtained now, it would not stop me from applying hindsight.

"As regards the alleged 'murder' of Iraqis by military means, and by means of embargoes, Mr Bould makes the common failure to observe that any soldier, in any war, is at perfect liberty to abandon his allegiance, and his armaments, and surrender to the more virtuous side. That so many Iraqis chose not to do so is deeply regrettable, and suggests that the UK/US propaganda machine was not working as well it should, but nobody's perfect. All any Iraqi soldier had to do was to get out of his tank, APC or whatever, run half a kilometre to east or west, then turn south. He would then have had only to look for someone to surrender to, as many did. As for civilians, it is an aspect of modern warfare that civilians sometimes get caught in the crossfire. The dead of Coventry and Dresden were not victims of murder, and no one has ever been so stupid as to arraign the Luftwaffe or the RAF on their account. Subsequently, Iraqi civilians have had only to make their way to the nearest border and claim political asylum. The fact of having claimed it automatically qualifies them, bearing in mind the brutality of Saddam's regime."

"Hideaway"

Dear Editors:
I hope you will not feel insulted if I pass comment on the story "Hideaway" by Alastair Reynolds, which appeared in the July 2000 issue of the magazine. I've only recently come back to reading science fiction after an abstention period of many years and have started to (re)read and enjoy some of my old, and probably very clichéd, but nevertheless excellent, favourites — i.e. Asimov, Heinlein, Anderson, etc. Furthermore, I decided that I'd like to get up to speed with the writings of the more recent sf authors, and what better way to help me achieve this aim, at the same time supporting British SF, than to subscribe to *Interzone*?

Unfortunately, I found this first story in my first issue of *IZ* to be singularly disappointing. I realize that the sf spectrum is very broad-ranging and covers many themes and styles, and that this particular story is cate-

gorized under the heading "Hard SF" — and not necessarily to everybody's taste. I don't have a PhD in any scientific discipline, but my reading habits are eclectic, and I am well enough versed in the physical sciences to enjoy and (at least half-way) understand anybody who pushes the boundaries. However, while this story may have shown off some knowledge of science it did nothing else. Without equivocation, and with due respect to Alastair Reynolds, I found this story one of the dullest and most uninvolving tales I have ever read.

Surely, even hard sf should be entertaining, with the science being a backdrop rather than the *raison d'être* of the story? The characters and dialogue were uninteresting, the storyline banal and the ending insipid. In my humble opinion, shorter stories need to be pithy and have some compactness of idea, time or place. This story is too fragmented and may be better suited to the length of a novel, where the ideas and characters could have some chance of development (although, unfortunately, in this case I doubt it). My apologies if my opinions appear ill-mannered (or worse, ill-informed), but I had to get this one off my chest.

Dave Cooper

cooper@david-thomas.freeserve.co.uk

The Ninth Gate

Dear Editors:

I've just read Nick Lowe's review of Polanski's *The Ninth Gate* (*IZ* 158) and I must say that Lowe expresses my sentiments about the movie uncannily. However, the novel by Arturo Perez-Reverte the film is based on is not only a European bestseller, but has also been translated into English. The translation is by Sonia Soto and was copyrighted in 1996. The First Vintage International Edition has been on the market since April 1998 with the title *The Club Dumas*. Harvill Press have published a British edition last year and Arturo Perez-Reverte has been an established name since in Europe. Please continue with your excellent mag, although a bit more research might help and even improve some of the facts.

By the way, any chance of Thomas M. Disch reappearing? Anything would do.

Leen van der Meyde

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Editor: Thanks for that information. Alas, we have nothing new by Thomas M. Disch in hand at present, but we live in hope...

Bean-Counting

Dear Editors:

Nice review by Tom Arden of the *Dozois Year's Best Science Fiction* (in *IZ* #157), but I must note an error: four stories in the book are reprinted from *F&SF*, not three (Grossbach, Reed, Silverberg, and Harrison).

Gordon Van Gelder

Editor, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*
PO Box 1806, New York, NY 10159-1806

Editor: Oops — sorry, Gordon. That puts *Interzone* and *F&SF* neck-and-neck, with four stories apiece in that particular anthology. (We editors are all prone to bean-counting.)

Letter of Complaint

Dear Editors:

I dislike stories about spaceships. Could *Interzone* stop publishing them?

Kim Newman

London

Editor: Since Kim signed-off his note with a "XXX," we take it that he has his tongue at least partly in his cheek. We also take it that he is referring obliquely to the reader's letter in *IZ* 158 (page 4) which criticized alternate-history stories and Eugene Byrne's tale "HMS Habakkuk" in particular...

The Worms of Hess

Barrington J. Bayley

PROLOGUE

The beauteous planet circles a bright, hard-white sun. A dazzling spectacle if seen from space, it shines white and blue. The climate is uniformly congenial, leaving aside the small polar ice caps. There are no seasons, axial tilt and orbital eccentricity being negligible.

For its type it is a large world – 12,000 miles in diameter – but surface gravity is moderate. A world ocean covers nearly all the globe. Land consists of three widely separated island continents, pieces of a one-time single original continent on which life had already evolved to the warm-blooded stage.

The beauteous planet would be unremarkable were it not for the divergent evolutionary paths taken on the three continents since the break-up of the ur-continent half a billion years ago.

And if those paths should meet again?

THE EASTERN CONTINENT

A brindled wolf had cached its stomach.

Peering shifty to left and right, it had scratched a shallow hole between two rocks, dumped the stomach, then hastily covered it up. Leaner and able to run faster now, it glanced nervously around again before loping off.

It was unaware that it had been observed by Ssprt hiding behind a crag up the hill. The small humanoid crinkled his ears in amusement. The wolf would have other stomachs cached here and there, as a precaution against scavengers, but this one – provided it contained prey as he hoped – was about to feed Ssprt.

Ssprt too could discard his digestion if need be, but in

his species it was more like a relic of bygone ages, a feature of fast-running predators and fast-running prey. A creature with the intelligence to hunt with traps and weapons did not need it.

Ssprt's eyes widened as he was about to set off down the hillside. He had a rival. A scavenger mountain dog was on the trail of the wolf-stomach, sniffing the air and scratching up dirt here and there. It knew there was a cache of food nearby.

He would have to fight the dog for the prize. His pulse quickened with excitement. He took his sling from his waist pouch and cast about for a stone to put in it. But he had taken only a few springing steps down the slope when a cawing cry far overhead caught his attention.

It was a messenger bird, soaring over the terrain in wide circles. Ssprt halted, and strained his ears to catch the words.

"Ssprt! Return to Krrp! Ssprt! Return to Krrp!"

Slowly and reluctantly, he put away his sling. He was loth to heed the instruction. He did not really want to take himself to the coastal camp, which to him was like an overcrowded city. He preferred to wander the wilderness living the life of a hunter, as did most of his kind.

A warm feeling of contentment came over him whenever he scanned the broken landscape, with its outcrops of orange-coloured rock and its prickly shrubs. To him this was the epitome of natural beauty. This was happiness and fulfilment.

But he belonged to a tribe, and therefore he was bound by duty. Then, too, Krrp was his mentor. He owed him an obligation.

Again Ssprt raised his eyes to the sky, until he spotted a carrying eagle soaring even higher than the messenger bird. He sent aloft a piercing whistle. Whatever the

eagle's original quest, its brain was unable to ignore the signal. The huge bird pivoted on its wings and dived towards the source of the sound. Ssprt leaned forward, raising his arms. The eagle hovered over him and settled its sternum along his back. Control nerves in his skin transponded with receptor nerves under the skin of the eagle. He now had command of its nervous system. It would do as he wished.

His feet left the ground. The eagle flapped its wings, circling as it gained height. Then Ssprt flew south, clinging effortlessly to the bird's body.

Swiftly the eagle bore him on a journey which would have taken several days on foot. The sprawl of conical tents which was the coastal commune came in sight. Beyond these wigwams nerve-controlled beasts of burden ploughed land for growing vegetable food.

The camp was clustered round a bay whose blue water shone in the sun. Spiralling downward, Ssprt noticed a tiny, oddly-shaped island which had not been in the bay before. On it grew two tall trees, stripped of foliage, but of a kind he was unable to name.

Some instinct told him this mysterious island was connected with his summons to Krrp. He set the eagle down amid the wigwams and released it, whereupon, freed of its burden, it flung itself back into the sky.

He stood unmoving while he got his bearings. The smell of so many people in one place afflicted his nostrils, bringing mixed feelings of distaste but also of nostalgia as he recalled his time spent here studying with Krrp. He strode out and reached his mentor's tent, issuing the soft, cooing visitor's call and receiving an answering coo granting him permission to enter.

Krrp was sitting on the clay floor, his legs folded under him. Ssprt also folded his legs and sat facing the mentor he had not seen for so long. Krrp looked not much older, for all that he lived such a sedentary life. The flat slits of his nostrils sagged but a little, the spike-like teeth in his round mouth were only slightly yellowed, and his flat, restless eyes were still bright.

"I have come at your command," Ssprt said respectfully.

Krrp's ears waggled in acknowledgment. "Reprise what I taught you of the nature of the physical world," he said.

Ssprt paused. This was like returning to his earlier life. Each morning Krrp would demand some such reprise from him.

He cast his mind back, and began a recital. "The world consists of a single finite land surrounded by the ocean, which is of indefinite extent," he said. "It is the duty of our tribe to conquer all the other tribes and become masters of the land." He paused again. "The natural unit of time is the day and night. The sun rises from the sea and passes over the world during the day, then sinks back into the sea on the other side. The stars do the same by night. By studying the rising and setting sun it is revealed that the stars move against it in a cycle lasting 631 days. This is a secret of the sky discovered by the savants, to the glory of our tribe, the Hlhloi. There are also four special stars which wander among the other stars."

"That is enough," said Krrp shortly. "I am glad to see that life in the wilds has not driven abstract knowledge from your mind."

He was silent, staring at the ground, as though what he had to say next was difficult for him. "But not everything I taught you is correct," he said at last. "Ours is not the only land. There is another, far away in the ocean."

"Another land?" Ssprt repeated in bewilderment. "But that is as much as to say another world. What of the Principle of Natural Harmony?"

"Apparently the Principle is wrong," Krrp snapped. He himself was the author of Natural Harmony, propounded by him as the fundamental law of existence. One of its consequences was that there could be only a single land, set amidst a single endless ocean. "At any rate it appears that another world exists. Visitors have come from it. Did you see that strange construction out in the bay?"

"You mean the little island?"

"It is an artificial island, able to move across the water carrying people on it. That is how the visitors have come."

The idea of a floating island was spectacular. "People? Like us?"

"Not like us. They are bigger, much bigger. Their faces are not like ours. They speak an unknown language. And, it seems, they do not know how to conjoin with useful animals."

"Then they are savages!" Ssprt burst out. "Lower than the most primitive of tribes!"

"Perhaps they know how to conjoin with animals in their own world," Krrp said mildly. "But enough of that. I did not bring you here to discourse on matters of science, but because you are our greatest warrior. Under your generalship we defeated the tribe of the Cr-crogoi. We now have to decide what course of action to take with these strangers. Shall we continue to tolerate them, or shall we kill them? The tribal council awaits your advice."

Ssprt, whose mind had been working with alacrity, already had the answer. "To do either is to risk more floating islands crossing the ocean with warriors from another world. It is certain that one day we shall have to fight the eastern tribes again, who though pacified for the moment have not yet been subjugated. What if these strangers were to make an alliance with them? We do not know what they are capable of. What we must do is to send them away, and tell them they may not come to our world again."

He rose to his feet. "I, Ssprt, will do that, and do it now! Tell me how I may meet with the strangers from the other world!"

Daring was the essence of Ssprt's military exploits. Alone he had flown into the main camp of the Cr-crogoi, undaunted by their numbers, to challenge their chieftain. Standing now on the pebbled beach of the bay, on which sea water lapped almost silently, he gazed out at the "floating island." From this distance he could see that it was not really an island at all, apart from being surrounded by water. It had walls, like a stockade.

Krrp had fetched Blip, who had managed to learn a

few words of the aliens' language. Also standing on the strand were three members of the tribal council, who had listened to Ssprt's judgment with grave agreement.

"How do the other-world stranger come ashore?" Ssprt said. "Do they bring their island in close and step on to land?"

"No," said Blip. "They bring it to a certain distance, and then swim the rest of the way. But they have not been here for two days now."

"Then we will go to them."

Overhead, carrying eagles circled. Ssprt and Blip whistled.

Dropping their riders on to the timber planking of the deck, the big birds departed. It was disorientating to stand on the floating construction, which the small humanoids could now see was made of wood throughout. The two "trees" which Ssprt had seen earlier grew from the planking, and bore unnaturally straight cross-branches.

Even weirder was to behold the other-worlders. They were giant man-things, twice the size of Ssprt's kind. It was doubtful that any carrying eagle could have lifted them. Their faces had a flat appearance, missing the protruding round mouth of Ssprt's kind. Their nostrils were wide and flanged, while their eyes stared and shifted focus but slowly, unlike the constantly darting eyes of the little humanoids. Add to this the small, immovable ears set close to the skull, instead of the conical, flexible ears which were the main means of facial expression in Ssprt's kind, and the manthings were unsettlingly blank and unreadable.

It was in this manner that ten or so manthings stared at the uninvited boarders. Ssprt looked around for their leader. He selected the biggest and addressed him, gesturing angrily.

"Leave! Go back! Back to your own world! Come here no more! If you come again, we will kill you!"

By his side, Blip stuttered out unrecognizable worlds as he attempted to translate Ssprt's injunction. The manthings gave no sign that they understood. One turned and spoke to another in a low, booming voice.

Then they acted.

Blip took fright before Ssprt did. He dodged the reaching hands, sprang across the deck and dived through the balustrade, whistling to his circling eagle. The great bird's sternum swept barely a hand's breadth above the swelling surface of the bay, to carry aloft Blip's dripping form even as the nerve conduction paths were being established.

Ssprt too whistled. His steed's batwings canopied the deck, hovering with ungainly flapping, but when it was unable to reach him it forgot the summons and flew off.

Struggling, scratching, biting, Ssprt was dragged down a companionway. The anchor was pulled up. The sails were unfurled.

The ship moved out of the bay.

The manthings were dishonourable. On that glorious day when Ssprt had swooped down into the Cr-crogoi camp, allowing his eagle to fly off and leave him stranded, the Cr-crogoi chief had fought him honourably

man to man, like any estimable warrior. Ssprt's peril lay in that should he vanquish the chief he then faced the entire camp of warriors, one after the other, until he fell. Twenty he had killed, until the enemy paid tribute to his valour and agreed to treat.

In contrast, many hands grabbed him on the manthing's ship. He was given no chance to fight one to one, when he might have stood some chance, however slight, with his sling and stone knife.

Down in the hold, light came only from the open hatch. From above came a crack as sails caught the wind. Ssprt felt the vessel move under him. The well-muscled manthings forced him wriggling along the floor of the hull, until they came to a large basket which was nailed down.

Within the basket, a nest of long, white worms squirmed softly together. Ssprt became numb with stupefaction.

He was forced to double over. His haunches were pressed down into the nest, among the hideous, pale, tape-like worms. Something soft and squishy touched him, then probed. Emitting shrieking noises he had never imagined he could ever utter, he felt one of the worms slither into his anus and push upwards. The sensation was oily and unpleasant. Further squirmed the worm, making Ssprt's abdomen writhe, until it occupied about half his small intestine.

It was then that he slipped into a merciful faint.

Slearth was pleased. The voyage was proving worth all its hardships. A new intelligent species had been found. Though primitive in some respects, Slearth and his comrades judged it was ready to meet and be used by the most advanced form of life of all and pinnacle of evolution.

The parasitic intestinal worm.

He and Oosh laid the new host down to sleep, leaving their colleague Wertiern to settle in the new body and to explore its spinal cord and brain. It was lucky, in a way, that the long voyage had been so hard. Food had run out, and it had not been possible to gather enough from the sea to feed everyone. Cannibalism had been resorted to, which had left a number of the masters hostless. Starved of nourishment, they had shrunk to a size suitable for the smaller intestines of the natives.

They went back up on deck. The natives had rallied, reacting to the abduction of their comrade by flying over the ship carried by their big birds, and dropping rocks on it. When the rain of stones grew troublesome the seafarers brought out their longbows. Eagle after eagle plummeted into the sea, transfixed by arrow shafts.

The survivors gave up and fled back to land.

Ssprt awoke to find himself in sunlight. He was lying on the open deck. A fresh salty breeze blew in his face. The ship was swaying slightly as its sails drove it across the shining surface of the ocean.

Giant manthings surrounded him, gazing down with their expressionless faces.

One spoke. "Is the host suitable, Wertiern?"

Ssprt climbed to his feet. "It is suitable," he said.

"Indeed, the experience is pleasingly novel."

Shocked, Ssprt realized that he had spoken without any volition on his part. And in the language of the manthings!

Or rather, something in him had.

This, surely, was worse than standing alone against the entire tribe of the Cr-crogoi.

But he was a warrior. He forced down his fear.

Again he found himself speaking involuntarily in the alien tongue. "It is most refreshing to be in a host which has been allowed to develop its own personality... it is a pleasure we have sacrificed for the sake of social progress, I fear..."

Then: "The host understands our speech by now. Explain his situation, Slearth."

A manthing addressed Ssprt. "Listen carefully, and I will tell you what has been done. Your kind knows how to control animals, is that not so? You are superior to the animals you control. A being more superior still now controls you. The worm which is within you owns you. We, too, are owned by the worms within us."

Ssprt's ears curled back in revulsion. He now realized he was no longer physically aware of the parasite in his guts. But he was aware of something else. In his mind were more memories than should be there, memories which were crowding into it. He could remember being a manthing – several manthings at different times, in fact – in another world. And there were mindless episodes when he had been a nesting worm engaged in mating or in incomprehensible rituals with other worms.

Ssprt was adept at conjoining with animals. Being on the receiving end of nerve control was startling, shocking, even if not entirely unfamiliar. He cried out in horror, still in the alien language.

"What is happening? I will cease to be myself!"

"You will be neither yourself nor not yourself. Identity is a crude and useless appendage. Surrender to your parasite. That is the destiny of your entire race."

"No!" Ssprt crinkled his ears in indignation. "I will not let it happen!"

"And how will you prevent it happening, my little friend?" Oosh teased.

"By means of this."

Ssprt ejected almost the whole of his digestion. Stomach and intestines sloughed away, his abdomen splitting along the adhesion lines, revealing reddened inner skin.

He now had a sleeker and lighter body designed for fast running. A slimy mess lay on the deck, wrapped in a glistening membrane, made more bulky by the incorporated worm.

The giant manthings stared at the scene aghast.

ON THE BROAD OCEAN

Oosh carried the basket containing the digestive tract of the small humanoid up on deck.

Wertiern still lay coiled within the intestines with their silvery membrane. It was a hundred days since the exploration ship had set off home with its abducted specimen.

The crewmen were about their duties, manning the tiller, trimming the sails, trailing nets to catch sea creatures with which to eke out the fresh provisions they had obtained on the eastern continent.

The humanoid Ssprt squatted on the deck, looking out to sea. Oosh set the basket down beside him. Ssprt glanced at its contents, then rose and laid himself on it face down, spreading his arms and legs. After only a few moments he rose again, having reincorporated his stomach and intestines. He resumed his position and began eating a broiled fish brought to him on a platter.

For the first 50 days Ssprt had resolved to starve to death, since to eat meant welcoming back the worm. Then he had relented. A body with a detachable digestive system absorbed nutrients quickly. Not once had he given Wertier time enough to overwhelm him. No worm, he believed, would ever be able to control one of his tribe. It could always be ejected first.

His plan had become to make the journey to the new world, escape, somehow rid himself of Wertier, then live off the land and make war against the worms and their hosts the manthings.

Not that the manthings treated him badly. They were amicable. While incorporating Wertier he was able to converse with them, and learn of the natural order in the other world.

"The urge of all life is to evolve," Oosh said one day, eating grilled fish with Ssprt. "A grazing animal is stupid. It digests coarse plant stuff and has to spend all its time eating. A predator is smarter. It speedily appropriates the tissues assembled slowly by the grazer. An intestinal parasite is smarter still. It does not have to hunt, or even to digest its own food."

Paradoxically the worms had become masters of their world while lacking consciousness and intelligence of their own. A parasite's body did not have room for a thinking brain. And there was no need to develop one. The worms appropriated the mental functions of their hosts.

"Why go to the trouble of evolving intelligence when you can steal someone else's?" Oosh said affably.

Not that the worms were passive recipients of the intelligence they co-opted. They used consciousness ferociously. The one psychic function they did reserve for themselves was memory, laid down in their soft, tape-like bodies to provide continuity. At the foundation of those memories was a genetic urge: DOMINATE! Dominate the creatures you infest! Dominate the environment of the creatures you infest! And so the western continent abounded in farms, multi-storied towns, canals, harbours, and ships carrying goods along rivers and around the coastline.

The worms were curious about their world. Ships driven from the continent by infrequent storms discovered islands, though far too tiny to be of any use. How far did the ocean extend? What else might lie in it? A suicide mission was despatched, a great ship with a navigation device, a gnomon for a charting a sun-cast shadow throughout the day, to ensure the ship would always

travel in a straight line. Its orders were to return only if it found something worthy of report. After thousands of days the mission did return, reduced to a handful of dying survivors. But it had found nothing. It had not even intended to return. Following its line of latitude the ship had sailed towards the east and arrived back from the west, making landfall on the opposite coast.

The civilization of the western continent was stunned.

The ocean was spherical!

Though in that case how everything loose did not fall off the sphere was a mystery.

The worm-inhabited manthings reacted quickly. They despatched ships in all directions, determined to find out what else lay on the sphere. A closed world could be dominated.

DOMINATION WAS ALL.

All the time they talked Ssprt could feel Wertiern probing, trying to take full command of his mind. The feeling had even ceased to be threatening. Wertiern wished to take care of him.

But Ssprt would never allow that. He judged that he had digested enough.

With a slick sound he deposited Wertiern upon the deck.

THE SOUTHERN CONTINENT

The harp trees hummed in the breeze, their musical tones carrying far beyond the grove. A single, majestic male tree dominated, standing guard over its harem. Here and there stood the stumps of rival males it had long ago poisoned to death.

The big male sent out a deep, angry bourdon note of warning. A swarm of pollen-bearing rotors was approaching, having been cast into the air by some distant male over the horizon. At the sound of their whirring the female trees tensioned their strings and transmitted a high-pitched siren song. The pollen pods responded by warping their rotors so as to swerve towards the grove. The big male responded too, catapulting a swarm of rotors of its own towards the invaders, knocking them off course or sending them sycamoring to the ground. Only a few got through, their chemical energy nearly spent, to fall among the female blossoms.

The male tree quivered. Keeping possession of a tree harem was not easy. Some rotors carried not just pollen but fertilized seeds. The dominant tree would surely need its poison darts again.

The delightful drama was witnessed by the two friends Gagra and Iblobet as they walked through the wilderness some distance from their coastal home town. Low cloud raced overhead. The whole landscape lay under a glowing, charged gloom. Soon there would be a thunderstorm.

They both revelled in the beauty of the wilderness. Gagra pointed away from the grove of harp trees, whose humming had subsided now. A mouse-rabbit was pursuing a tawny wolf. The wolf wished to avoid it, loping this way and that. Then it grew tired of fleeing and sat down on its haunches. The mouse-rabbit leaped invit-

ingly into the air, again and again aiming itself at the wolf's jaws, an offer which the wolf disdained, turning its head petulantly aside.

Finally the wolf yawned with boredom, upon which the prey animal succeeded in jumping straight into its jaws. By instinct the wolf chomped and swallowed. The mouse-rabbit was gone.

"Well done, little fellow!" Gagra cried out.

Gagra and Iblobet bore the bleak, bony faces of their kind. Even to their eyes these faces expressed a hopeless longing which was the badge of tragedy of their species. The two continued to walk, each seeming to think the thoughts of the other. Finally Gagra stopped and shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

"Iblobet," he stuttered, "you know you are the man I most admire."

"No!" Iblobet cried in panic. "Do not say it! Do not even think it!"

"We are not in town now. There is no civilization here. We are among the animals."

"Do not think what you are thinking!"

"Don't you remember the... stories... we listened to together?" Gagra uttered hoarsely.

Gagra was referring to the illegal storytellers who, in dimly-lit cellars, related pornographic tales of perverted eating. "They are only fantasies!" Iblobet protested. "Don't take them seriously!"

"Iblobet," Gagra pleaded, "you are the best man I know. The thing I want most in life is for you to eat me."

This confession made Iblobet shiver in his heart's core. "We should never have listened to those stories," he quavered. "They are too stimulating..."

"You can do it here," Gagra continued earnestly. "No one will know. You can say a forest lion-snake attacked me."

"It's not what you really want, Gagra," Iblobet said desperately. "It is an abuse of the natural urge. A man is only a man, however admirable. He is not a superior being."

"For us there are no superior beings!" Gagra replied in anguish.

For the rest of the day they walked unspeaking through rain and thunder. Unspeaking they camped that night, and likewise continued their hike next day. Around them stretched the landscape with its masses of coloured rock, its forests, its groves of harp trees and the occasional solitary harp tree humming urgently in search of a mate. Animals ran and hopped hither and thither.

Around mid-afternoon they skirted an isolated jungle whose fern branches and sword-shaped leaves swayed high in the air. Suddenly a tree tiger emerged from the foliage and sat on the dusty ground, gazing lazily around it.

The humanoids ceased their pacing to stare. For sheer animal beauty the tree tiger was unmatched. Its muscles rippled as it moved. Its pelt was a blazing chiaroscuro of red, yellow and blue.

Unmatched, too, was its killing ability. Tree tigers were symbols of power and dignity. They displayed uncanny

intelligence. Their pride also was legendary, scorning as they did any hunt-offering other than from a hunter nearly as skilled – a tawny wolf, or a lion-snake.

Gigra began to tremble. He turned to Iblobet and sprang suddenly to embrace him.

"I cannot restrain myself, my friend! Forgive me! Try not to despise me!"

Iblobet snatched at him and tried to hold him back, before watching in horror as Gigra bounded towards the tiger and knelt at its feet.

The tiger turned its massive face indolently, crimson eyes blinking. It made no move.

Gigra pulled his knife from his belt. While the tree tiger continued to stare as if in puzzlement, he slashed his forearm. Blood flowed copiously from the wound.

"Devour me!" he howled.

Slowly the tiger bent its head to lick the blood which dripped from Gigra's arm. There was a pause, then a crunch as powerful jaws crushed bone. The feeding began. Iblobet stood mesmerized to see his boon companion being eaten in big chunks, shrieking in agony and perverted delight, until he could shriek no more. He was gone. He had fallen prey to a degenerate travesty of the transforming urge. Falsely, he had come to see the natural qualities of a magnificent animal as something superhuman.

Iblobet covered his eyes. If only he and Gigra had not excited themselves with pornographic stories so!

Heavy with grief, obsessed with his friend's self-immolation, Iblobet made the journey back home. The landscape around him, so spectacular and awe-inspiring at other times, now seemed but a darkened stage on which was presented the dilemma of his species.

It was an existential quandary. The urge to climb the ladder of life was felt by every warm-blooded animal. It was different from the evolution of a species in which the individual did not count. This was individual evolution. It could only be accomplished by being absorbed into a superior creature. When a hungry predator caught and ate prey, that prey's tissues were absorbed into the predator's tissues. But if the prey offered itself, usually when it sensed the predator was not hungry, another kind of eating took place, in which more than tissue was absorbed. The prey animal's psychic essence too was absorbed, into the predator's essence.

Hunt-offering was predation in reverse. The prey chased and pestered the predator to eat it, so that it could be transformed into the higher animal. The mouse-rabbit had done well indeed to launch itself into the jaws of the tawny wolf. Animals high in the scale were fastidious about hunt-accepting. They did not wish to adulterate their essence with those far below them in quality.

A few lesser species had managed to hunt-offer themselves into extinction. Super-predators offered themselves but rarely, and the tree tiger not at all. But then the tree tiger had only one superior – man.

And humanoids? At the top of the food chain? Their evolutionary urge was the strongest of all. But for them there was no upward outlet. And so the natural desire

curdled, festered, caused anguish, until the whole race cried out in pain, and until some, like Gigra, could contain themselves no longer.

An entire species teetered on the edge of psychic collapse.

Iblobet came in sight of the coastal town with its houses of rough-hewn stone and its quays for tethering fishing canoes. Gazing down from the hilltop approach, he saw what appeared to be a huge boat, of unfamiliar shape, floating just beyond the headland. Unable to imagine how there could be so huge a tree from which to hollow out such a canoe, he walked down into the streets of the town. He encountered an air of excitement, and grabbed a passing townsman.

"What is happening?"

The fellow made an alarmed gesture, passing his hands across his face, before pointing out into the bay, where tall tree-like erections on the big canoe could just be seen over the rooftops.

"What is it?" Iblobet demanded.

"No one knows! It floated in from the sea! And it carries men of the strangest appearance. Though perhaps one should not call them men, so weird are they."

"Where do they come from?"

"No one has dared step aboard to ask them."

Iblobet let him go and made his way to the sea front. A few canoes were in the bay. They had approached the strange craft, though not too closely, and sent out questioning calls. No replies came, though figures would be seen standing on the foreign boat and gazing landward.

Why had they not come ashore? Perhaps they were too proud, Iblobet thought.

That made him think of the tree tiger, and the grotesque death of his friend Gigra. A feeling of abandonment swept over him. With the sun low in the sky he walked to the quays, then stepped down into a canoe. Untethering it, he paddled out of the bay.

The great boat stood as tall in the water as the tallest building, even without the tree-like columns which rose from it. Approaching it, Iblobet could see the passengers. They were considerably larger than Iblobet's kind. Their skulls were oddly formed, their faces alien in cast, hardly like human faces at all, but more like the visages of bizarre beasts.

But as they looked over the balustrade at the paddling Iblobet, something struck right into his heart.

Here was intelligence and power. These "men" radiated it. They shone with superiority. And now Iblobet's feeling of abandonment became one of certainty and a joyful hope of fulfilment.

A rope ladder dangled down the big canoe's side. Iblobet tied the canoe's line to it, then climbed until he stood on the deck.

The sea breeze wafted into his face. Adoringly he regarded his saviours.

Gigra, if only you had waited till now!

He stared around him, taking in the sight of the enigmatic contrivances which littered the gigantic boat. His eyes roved over the large, impressively unwieldy bodies

of the strangers, thrilling to think that soon he might be assimilated into one of them.

He thought of the tree tiger. He thought of Gogra. No tree tiger could have built this magnificent sea craft!

Gently, hesitantly, he approached the nearest manthing and knelt respectfully at the creature's feet. Pulling his knife from his belt, he gashed his forearm in offering.

The surrounding manthings stared impassively down at him as pink blood flowed. They spoke together in booming voices, their words indecipherable. A decision was made. Iblobet's knife was taken from him. Unresisting, panting with excitement, he was lifted to his feet, taken down a companionway and into the ship's hold.

The vast surprise of what happened next left Iblobet confused. This was the second oceanic exploratory ship to make foreign landfall. Like the first, it had experienced a long and difficult voyage. It also was carrying a nest of host-deprived parasites. Iblobet had expected to be torn limb from limb and devoured. Instead he was forced haunches first into a basket of squirming worms.

The crew of the explorer ship had a primary duty: start back as soon as possible if any major land mass was found, with a specimen of the dominant life form. The requirements were now fulfilled. To delay further risked the success of the expedition.

The anchor was pulled up, the sails dropped. The ship was far out at sea before the worms realized their appalling mistake.

THE WESTERN CONTINENT

"It was a terrible experience, brothers. The host was not suitable."

Oohryien, the worm to have occupied Iblobet, safely transferred to a more familiar manthing now, faced the ruling council alongside a number of his travelling companions. The ship on which he had endured the hardships of the voyage rode at anchor in the great harbour, alongside the ship which earlier had arrived from the newly-discovered eastern continent.

Only these two ships had returned so far.

Oohryien continued. "The humanoid knelt before us and slashed his arm with a knife. We had assumed this to be a customary greeting, perhaps a mark of respect between warriors. We were wrong. The humanoid was offering himself as food! Nature has taken an unexpected course upon this world-continent. The prey sometimes hunts the predator and begs to be eaten! It is a fundamental urge, a wish to be transformed into a higher type of creature by assimilation. When I entered the creature's digestive system he assumed he was being asked to absorb me."

"Furthermore," Oohryien went on quietly, "the fauna of this continent have prodigious digestive systems. Given time, the creature would have digested me."

This shocking news was greeted with agitation.

"This is an abomination!" a council member exclaimed. "We have now discovered two intelligent races across the ocean, neither of which we can infest! What are we to

do?"

An old, wise worm, premier of the council, spoke. "This belief in digestive assimilation is but a dream, is it not?"

"Can lower animals have mental delusions?" Oohryien answered. "I do not think so. A real phenomenon is at work, and no doubt is connected in some way with the abnormally fierce digestion I encountered. Something occurs during the 'hunt-offering.' The individual's essence, even including some memory, survives ingestion and blends with the essence of the eater. Before self-preservation forced me to abandon my host I found buried memories of being a whole series of animals. I also learned of a canon of passionate songs and stories among his kind, expressing a longing for a mythical super-race into which to disappear and so transcend one's own nature."

The old, wise worm was thinking with all the concentration of its host's brain.

"It is possible," he said cautiously, "that there may be an answer to all this..."

Shortly after his landing on the new world, a manthing had come to Ssprt and said, "Wertiern has agreed to depart permanently from you. You can live in mental isolation from now on, if that is what you prefer."

By now Ssprt had learned the manthings' language on his own account. Though a prisoner, his circumstances were comfortable. Two manthings attended him and brought him his food. They also brought physicians who examined his body, and scholars who interrogated him on the race and society from which he came.

He was being studied. The worms were seeking a way to infest him.

Ssprt was confident they would find none. But for the moment, he was watched too closely to enact his plan of escape.

The city in which he was kept was of amazing size. For that reason Ssprt preferred it when his guards took him for walks in the countryside beyond it. The coastal area sloped down from a mountain range, offering well-watered meadows which had been turned into farmland. Although it was different in character from his homeland, Ssprt still found the landscape beautiful in the extreme.

He had learned that the worms inhabiting the manthings were but the leading species of a large genus. All larger land animals were host to worms of some sort, though only the more evolved had expanded their parasitism to the nervous systems of their victims. The exceptions were the domesticated food animals. The worms themselves had developed vermicidal drugs to purge these of their parasites, so as to make them more efficient producers of meat.

Ssprt did not really notice it when his diet changed. The varied foods of the western continent were all novel to him. First of all he was given Iblobet's brain to eat, sliced up and garnished with wild herbs. The rest of the body was kept cool and fresh and fed to him over the next ten days – all except the bones.

Of course, the worms did not really know whether the

exercise would be successful. On the advice of their southern-continent captive, they had fed Iblobet to Ssprt when his stomach was already half full. But when the next thing was done it was done quickly. Ssprt's two guards sprang on him. A pad exuding a sleep-inducing vapour was applied to his mouth and nostrils, lest he should discard the parasite immediately. He was carried to where the worm lay coiled in a basket.

He awoke to find himself in a different room. Sunlight shone from openings which gave him a view of the city and the countryside beyond. Otherwise the room was empty, though he guessed eyes watched him somehow or other.

Lithely he climbed to his feet. He could feel the worm within him, probing his mind. It was his old friend Wertiern. Ssprt's ears crinkled. They had promised he would not be pestered again. Well, the recourse was easy... He prepared to discard... and stopped.

Accept, accept... combine with the superior power!

That was not Wertiern's voice. It was not Wertiern thinking.

It was himself!

But not himself. Not himself as he had been before. There was another within him besides Wertiern. Or rather, not another, more like another influence. Dimly he could remember being in another place, with strange animals, different from the animals either in his own world or in the world of the worms, and with strange ways. He remembered that it was a shame and an abasement to be condemned to be always merely oneself. What was needed was to escape from oneself into a larger life.

Thought of discarding Wertiern melted away.

Ssprt was now an indissoluble trinity. The worms could not have taken him by himself. They could not have taken Iblobet by himself. Put the two together, and it could be done. The worms had found the route to domination over the three continents. There would be three parts to the new order. One would be eaten, entering through the mouth. One would take control, entering through the anus. One would remain the visible, tangible instrument.

Ssprt rejoiced in knowing that his kind was to be that instrument. He relaxed, enjoying the concordance, allowing the worm to see through his eyes and to sift through his memories. He looked through the window. Stars were appearing in the fading sky.

Ssprt, Wertiern and Iblobet had all, in the past, looked up at those stars and wondered as to their nature.

EPILOGUE

The beauteous planet continues to roll its way round its sun with the hard white light.. It is an unusual planet. It has produced four intelligent species simultaneously. Most life-bearing planets do not produce any.

Four, that is, if one counts the worms. The worms have brought together three of those four. Three divergent paths which have met again, creating a river which is to

become a torrent, a torrent which one day will gush into the stream of stars in the beauteous planet's sky.

The worms come up the fast track of evolution. They claw their way nimbly over the slow advances made by others. With each species they infest, they add to their knowledge. Adapting themselves to any type of digestive tract, accommodating all but the rarest of biochemistries, proof against any vermifuge, they will learn to defend themselves against every desperate onslaught aimed at their extinction.

Their instinct for domination is unstoppable. Of the multitude of species in the stream of stars, one will name the beauteous planet Hess. Like many in the multitude, it will fear and resist the worms of Hess.

But all resistance will be overcome.

Barrington J. Bayley appeared here, the issue-before-last, with "Planet of the Stercorosaurs," the first story of his we had published in a couple of years. He has not slowed down in his writing, however, and it seems that two new novels of his may be appearing soon. See the "Astounding Worlds of Barrington Bayley" website, maintained by Finnish sf fan Juha Lindroos: <http://oivas.com/bjb/>

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The Blood Thieves

Liz Williams

I knew what the girl was as soon as I saw her. I'd come across one of her kind a few years ago, you see, when there was all that panic about the volcano. All manner of things had come out of the darkness then, and one of them had turned up in my mum's front garden. But that thing had been small and black, with eyes like dead coals. This girl, sitting on a stone in the derelict lot behind the bus station, was beautiful, forcibly reminding me that I had now been girlfriend-less for some two months. Glimpsing her face in the midst of the furs of her sealskin parka, I could see that she'd been crying: the cold had frozen the tears to frosty snail-tracks down the curve of each cheek. I could hear my heart beating in the silent air. I knew that if I had any sense, I should turn and steal away, pretend I hadn't seen her but, as usual, I was too curious.

"Miss?" I said tentatively. "Excuse me?"

I saw her catch her lower lip with one pointed tooth.

"I know why you're here," she said. Her voice sounded clear and accusing and remote.

I found myself stammering. "Do you? I mean – there's a possibility that the land's up for sale, and I –"

"What are you called?"

Automatically I reached into my briefcase and handed the girl my business card. She took it in little pale fingers and stared at it as though I'd presented her with a dead rat.

"Olaf Olafsson. Two names. Are they yours?"

"Yes, I –"

"Reykjavik. That is what they call this place now, I believe. And this 'Magnusdottir Real Estate Agency'? What is this?" She smiled thinly. "You see, I can read your runes, *thorn* and *isa* and *ehwaz*, even though they are dead and tombed on paper."

"It's a... a property company. A company that buys and

sells buildings."

The girl gave me a look of utter contempt. "Only your kind would think stones are things to sell. And will you buy and sell this house, too?"

"Which house?"

She gazed around the derelict lot: at the spidery sea grass and the broken beer bottles.

"This is my house," she said. "You do not see it, but it is here. It has always been here, ever since the breaking of First Winter and the great snows. So many have gone to the rocks and the ice, but we remain, I and my child who is sick. And now you would sell it, and build another?"

She blinked, and diamonds formed at the ends of her eyelashes. I heard myself saying

"Look – nothing's settled yet. The buyer hasn't really decided anything."

"Who would buy this? I know how such a place looks to the eyes of your kind. You can never see what is truly there."

I said weakly, "Apparently there's a plan for redevelopment."

"Redevelopment? By whom?" She turned in a whisper of furs and looked straight into my eyes. It was like looking out onto the ice, and the winter glare. It dazzled me and I stumbled backwards.

I heard myself say, "The people who want to buy this land are called Anaheim del Marche. They're a biotechnology company. I'm not sure exactly why they're interested in it."

"They are nothing but home-breakers to me. I charge you, Olaf the Double-Named. Find out why they want to steal my land. And do not let them take my house away." Her voice faded like the wailing of a kittiwake. And then she was gone, and I was alone in the derelict lot with a

cold wind blowing off the sea and the cries of the gulls in the winter air above.

I didn't go straight back to the office. Instead, I left the car where it was and walked down Pjorsa Street to Gunderson's bar. I felt a bit dazed, and in need of a beer. I was also hoping that Gunderson himself would be there: if anyone knew what to do, he would. Once inside, I ordered a beer, enquired after the whereabouts of the proprietor and sat down in the corner.

After a few minutes, Gunderson appeared from the back regions, wiping his hands on a towel and bringing with him a faint fragrance of herring. All the same, he had tied his grey hair neatly back in a pony tail and he was wearing clean jeans. His single eye was bright.

"Afternoon, Olaf. Got the day off? I can't stay long, I'm afraid. I've got to pick someone up at the airport in a bit."

"Oh, that's okay," I said. "I just wanted..." To my dismay, I heard my voice fading away. The bar seemed suddenly very dark. The next thing I knew, I was lying flat on my back on the bench with Gunderson's concerned face hovering over me. I blinked. He seemed to have two good eyes all of a sudden. Then I realized I was seeing double.

"Olaf, man. Are you all right?"

"Don't know."

Gunderson disappeared and returned a moment later with a bottle of Islay malt. He got the stuff at a cut-price rate from one of the ferry captains.

It was like taking a sip out of a peat bog: it could have woken the dead. I spluttered and revived.

"I think I've seen something," I told him. A lot of Icelandic conversations begin like this. Gunderson did not appear remotely surprised.

"All right then, Olaf Olafsson. What do you think you have seen?"

"It was in the lot behind the bus station – one of old Sigurdson's properties. His lawyers are selling off the land. I went to have a look at it for a client; they're thinking of purchasing it for redevelopment. But there was someone sitting in the middle of it. A girl. Not a normal girl. You know."

"You saw one of the huldra?"

"Keep your voice down! You're not supposed to say their name!"

The blue eye winked. "Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen. What did she say?"

As briefly as possible, I told him. Then I sat and sipped my whisky while Gunderson considered the matter.

At last he said: "Look, I don't have to tell you that things are getting serious when the huldra start manifesting to perfectly ordinary people like you. They don't like us to see them, because it diminishes them; makes them as queasy as you were a moment ago. If she put a charge on you, then you'll have to fulfil it."

I sighed. Gunderson glanced up at the clock.

"I've got to go and meet this flight, but I'll be back about four. Come and see me then."

I watched his lanky figure vanish in the direction of the doorway. I finished my whisky, and my neglected beer,

and then I fished out my mobile and told the office I'd be back in on Monday. In the meantime, I told them, I was going to see a client. Then I sat for a moment, trying to think of what I would say to Mr Ed McNally of Anaheim del Marche when I next saw him. My boss had been insistent that this was the location the company wanted, and now I'd have to talk their representative out of the purchase. "Sorry," I pictured myself saying breezily. "Can't close the deal on the old Sigurdson land, I'm afraid. You see, it's really a fairy's house, and –"

McNally already thought Icelanders were weird as hell. I'd seen it in his face when we'd first met; a kind of unease, masked with joviality. Not for the first time, I wondered why the company had chosen to come to Reykjavik, of all places.

In the back of the bar, someone turned the radio on and the strains of Human Behaviour drifted out into the chilly afternoon light. Bjork's voice reminded me of the huldra's own: thin and eldritch and strange. What about *inhuman* behaviour? I reflected, dismally. Who could say anything at all about that?

I made my way to the Intercontinental Hotel and found Ed McNally sitting in the bar, staring out across the bleak expanse of the water. A shaft of late-afternoon sun glinted from the distant wall of a passing iceberg. I thought it was a magnificent view, but it seemed to depress McNally. He glanced up at me without enthusiasm.

"Ever been to Texas, Olafsson?"

"I'm afraid not." I tried to infuse my voice with suitable regret. McNally just grunted. "Look," I said. "About that vacant land behind the station. I'm afraid there's a problem with it."

"Yeah? What kind of problem?"

"Terrible legal complications. I'm sure you can imagine what the land laws are like here – half of them go back to 12th-century claims and, to be quite honest, by the time we sort it all out you'll have spent your money twice over."

"That so?" McNally removed his boots from the coffee table. "Well, shit, that's not a problem."

"It isn't?"

"No. Nothing special about that plot, after all. As long as we can get somewhere fairly central."

"Oh," I said, hope rising. "I thought you were set on that particular property."

"Yeah, your boss seemed to think it would be ideal, but sure, I'm open to suggestions."

"Okay," I said. I tried to stop my face from cracking in a huge, relieved grin. "Great. Then maybe I could fax you some alternatives?"

"Sure, whatever. Doesn't matter where the hell it is, as long as it's central, like I said, and in a location that the company can keep secure."

"Secure?" I asked.

"Sure – the lawyers were pretty insistent about that. Don't want people breaking in and stealing the blood samples. Though it's kinda hard to see why anyone would want to."

"Mr McNally," I said. "What exactly is your company proposing to do here?"

Ed McNally frowned. "Thought you'd have seen it on TV; we did a big feature on your little news show last month."

"I was on holiday for a couple of weeks; must have missed it."

"Haven't seen the posters in your doctor's surgery?"

"No, I haven't been to the doctor in years."

"Healthy, eh? Well, that's good. See, my client's involved in the field of genetic research. The project they're going to be running here is to take a sample of everyone's DNA, so that they can track genetic markers, study possible diseases and so on. In return, you guys get free medicine for five years."

"But why Iceland? Surely you could do that in the States?"

"As a matter of fact, they couldn't. Here in Iceland, you've got a very small population, and a limited gene pool: it's much easier to trace the markers than it is in a big, mixed population like the U.S. See, there isn't a whole lot of genetic diversity here." He gave me a uneasy glance; he was a stone's throw away from calling us all inbred. "In the States, for example, you've had a whole lot of immigration. There are literally millions of chemical components strung along the population's chromosomes – what our folks say on the publicity material is that it's kinda like trying to find one flat note, sung by one individual, in a chorus where a whole bunch of other people are singing their favourite tunes. Here, in Iceland, everyone is more or less singing the same song."

"I see," I said. I didn't, really, but I was so relieved I'd saved the huldra's house that I didn't actually care. I should have known that things wouldn't be that easy.

I left the hotel and headed home, picking up a takeaway en route. Then I called my cousin Sula, the doctor. She knew about science, and Mr McNally's gene project sounded more than a bit sinister to me. But Sula was enthusiastic.

"I think it's a great idea," she said. "I know there've been some objections about patient's privacy, but the Althing's agreed to it and I don't blame them. Del Marche are mapping for inherited disease, that's all. I think you've been watching *The X-Files* too much."

I was reassured, at least for a while. That evening, I made my way back to the lot behind the bus station with the good news. I had no idea how to summon the huldra, but in the event, it wasn't necessary. As I stepped into the lot, she curdled out of the air. I felt a breath of frost on my cheek.

"Well?" she said. I told her about the deal. She crept closer, and put her hand on my sleeve. She smelled of snow. "The huldra can be grateful," she murmured.

Embarrassed, I said, "It's enough to know that I've done someone a good turn. Wouldn't want you to lose your house, after all."

"The ones who wanted to buy my house. Are they angry?"

"No," I said. "It doesn't matter where they go; as long as they've got somewhere to build a laboratory."

The huldra frowned. "A laboratory? What is that?"

Her presence was magnetic, as though I was iron tuned into the north. I started babbling on about the gene project; repeating what my cousin had told me. I did not

know whether it would make any more sense to her than talk of magical spells would to me, although I somehow got the impression that she was disdainful of human ways rather than ignorant. But the huldra was staring at me in dismay.

"So they are blood thieves and body-sackers, these people who would buy my house. And what will they do, once they have sniffed out our ancestor's secrets?"

"Well, if they know which strands have markers, they can isolate particular hereditary diseases. That's a good thing, isn't it?" I added, lamely.

The girl turned and spat a glittering lump of ice into the middle of the sea grass. She said, "We are kin, your kind and mine, however little we like it. We have been kindred for generations, since men loved the maidens of the huldra, and women opened their winter windows to let in unhuman lovers. And if these blood thieves find that there is strangeness in the blood, that other humans do not have? What then, Olaf the Double-Named?" Her smile grew malicious.

I thought for a moment. The evening seemed to be growing even colder. "They'll want to know why."

"Yes, Olaf, they will want to know why. And more blood thieves and body-sackers will come, from all across the grey seas, and perhaps they will try to seek out the huldra, too, and disturb us further. Perhaps there will be so many of them that they will drive us into the glacier fastnesses where even we cannot walk with ease, or out to sea with the selkies."

And not just the huldra, I reflected. As my cousin had said, I was a big fan of Mulder and Scully. If Anaheim del Marche discovered that there was something very strange indeed embedded in the Icelandic genome, then God knows what might happen. Visions of CIA involvement and sinister conspiracies flitted through my mind like ghosts. But I did not see what we could do to prevent the project from going ahead.

Out of the sudden shadows I heard her say, "It rests with you, and I charge you again, Olaf the Double-Named who has saved my house for me: do not let them have their way. We are all kin. And if the blood thieves come, there will be grieving from Akureyri to Hekla, and not the voices of my kind alone."

And then she was gone again, and I was standing in the derelict lot for the second time that day, with a huldra's charge upon me. Numbly, I walked back to the car and took the road out past Kopavogur.

Once I'd reached the head of the fjord I stopped and got out of the car. In one direction I could see Surtsey's sinister mass rising out of the grey seas and in the other, the heights of Hekla's great bulk in the last of the light. The wind tasted of snow. I stood, shivering, until the light began to fade, but no answers came on the evening wind. So I went back into Reykjavik and did what any sensible Icelander would do under the circumstances: I got drunk. And whenever I get drunk, my mouth behaves like a door flapping in the breeze. By midnight, my problem had become common knowledge. That's the trouble with this town: everyone always ends up knowing every-

one else's business.

Towards midnight, Gunderson came to sit beside me. His eye glittered like the light on the sea. He never seemed to regard the loss of the other eye as any great inconvenience, but you know what they say about the Icelander who loses a leg in a car crash and tells people what a relief it is – all it did was get in the way of the other one. Gunderson was a bit like that. It sometimes occurred to me that he saw more with one eye than most people did with two.

"So," he said. "Still got problems?"

"Yes, still got problems." I leaned forwards and put my head in my hands.

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I've no idea." My voice sounded as though it was coming from the bottom of a well. Suddenly, I felt unnaturally sober. "I can't stop a multinational project, can I? If it was environmental – if they were striking for oil or despoiling the landscape, I might be in with a chance... But the gene project's a good thing, isn't it? Given all the investment and free medicine?"

Personally, given a choice between my arthritic granny getting her medicine free of charge and a possibly adverse effect on Iceland's most sinister residents, I was inclined to welcome Anaheim del Marche with open arms. But then there was the charge on me, and given the huldrafolk's public relations record, I didn't take it lightly.

Gunderson didn't say anything for a moment. Then he murmured, "I have found that in dealing with the huldra, it is best not to be too clever. It's best to follow your heart, and be as true to it as you possibly can. You know they are supposed to be the children of Loki, the old god of trickery? The best way to fight trickery is not to entertain it oneself. It's difficult to outwit the huldra... And now I think it's time you went home and got some sleep."

I knew he was right. It was the time of evening when they were starting to sing drinking songs – how the hero headed out across the glacier alone after the death of his father and knows he will never see the settlement again. That was one of the cheerful ones. It was definitely time to go home.

I spent the weekend fretting, and on Sunday evening I broke the habit of a lifetime and went to church. Initially, it wasn't a lot of comfort. I was still nursing a hangover, and an arctic chill was creeping beneath the door of the church. In front of me, Kara Gunnardottir's child had developed a runny nose, and when the first hymn finished, its howls went on. Everyone gave Kara sympathetic glances; a lot of the children were coming down with coughs and colds at this time of the year. Then an image of the huldra, and our first meeting, dropped into my mind like a stone down a well. *So many have gone to the rocks and the ice, but we remain, I and my child who is sick...* For the first time in three days, I had what might turn out to be a good idea. Follow your heart, Gunderson had said.

And so, for the third time in a week, I went back to the lot behind the bus station and waited for the huldra. Despite the cold, my hands were clammy inside the thick

gloves; I didn't feel nervous, so much as apprehensive. It reminded me of teenage dates. Then I turned and she was there.

"Olaf Olafsson?" she whispered. She seemed smaller, somehow, and insubstantial. I could see the wall behind her through her body.

"Are you all right?" I said, in some alarm.

"My child is dying."

"I'm so sorry," I said. "But listen to me. We are kin, you said – your kind and mine."

"What of it?"

"If our peoples are really related, then there might be something we can do to help," I told her.

She gave a doubtful frown. "How could a human help my child?"

"I helped you once before, didn't I?" I said. "I saved your house, remember? My cousin's a doctor, and her clinic's still open for the evening patients. If you could bring your child to her, she might be able to do something for it. I know she'll try."

The huldra seemed to shrink into herself.

"Please," I said. "Trust me."

She wavered for a moment in the dark air and then after a long pause she said, "Very well."

My cousin Sula barely blinked when she opened the door of the clinic to find us standing on the step, even though it was perfectly obvious that the girl with me didn't quite hail from the same species.

"Olaf?"

"Sorry to disturb you," I said. "But this young lady needs your help. It's her baby." The huldra clasped the small bundle in her arms more tightly to her body, as though we might try to take it away from her.

"All right," Sula said after a pause. "You'd better come inside."

Once within the house, the huldra shed garments at a somewhat alarming rate, until she was sitting in a long pale tunic. Her face, which had been pale as snow, was now blotched with pink.

"It's so hot in here," she whispered.

Briskly, my cousin said, "Well, I'll try and be quick. Let's have a look at the baby."

The huldra peeled back the sealskin wrap to reveal a pinched little face like a prune. It was without question the ugliest child I had ever seen. Sula performed a brief examination, with the huldra watching her like a hawk.

"Tell me," my cousin said. "What's the child's diet?"

"Milk, of course."

"And what about your diet?"

"I eat what my people have always eaten. Eggs and lichen and moss."

"No meat?"

"Of course not! Others of my kind might eat flesh, but I'm not a murderer."

"I think," Sula said "that it would be a good idea to do a blood test."

It took nearly half an hour to persuade the huldra, who by now was pink and damp, that we were not trying to

steal her child's blood for nefarious purposes. At last she agreed, and Sula disappeared into the back regions of the clinic with the sample. The huldra insisted on going with her, hugging the wizened child, and I went too. The child watched me all the time; with an ancient, implacable gaze. It had yellow eyes, like a gull. I smiled weakly at it, and it grinned, displaying small, sharp teeth.

After various tests, Sula held up the sample to the light and said, "I thought so. Anaemia. I'll give you an iron-for-tified formula, and we need to talk about supplements."

"Metal?" the huldra said, doubtfully. "What good will that do?"

Something was nagging at me. I said, "Aren't your kind supposed to be averse to iron?"

"Those are the people of the south," the huldra said. She took the container from my cousin and stared at it.

"Come back in a week," Sula said, adding with a rather frosty glance of her own: "And, Olaf - I'd like a word in private about bringing patients to see me. Later."

Outside the clinic, I turned to the huldra, but she was nowhere to be seen. I trudged wearily home through the snow, and though I went back to the derelict lot on the following evening, and then again on the day after that, there was no trace of the huldra or her baby.

I was beginning to wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing when there was a knock on the door. I opened it, to find the huldra, with a bundle in her arms.

"The shaman told me to come back in a week," she said, when I asked her where she had been. Evidently she had interpreted Sula's advice literally.

"How's the baby?" I asked. The huldra gave me the first real smile that I had yet seen on her wintry features.

"Look!" Proudly, she drew the child's hood aside. It was asleep, but its face was round and rosy and surprisingly human now that its eyes were closed.

"He is healed. And I withdraw my charge from you, Olaf Olafsson. I see that I was too harsh, in my pronouncement upon the thieves of blood." She looked down at the floor, uncertain for the first time. "My kind are old and wary, and it may be that men have changed since the early days. I have judged wrongly. Perhaps it is best that the blood thieves do come, after all... Thank you, Olaf Olafsson. And goodbye."

"Wait!" I cried, but she was already fading, like snow in spring, and the child woke at last and gave a thin gull's cry as she disappeared.

I did not lose hope of seeing her again. Gunderson just sighed when I poured out my heart to him over numerous glasses of whisky, and said he supposed I'd have to learn. We sold Anaheim del Marche part of the university campus for their laboratory. The whole population was tested, and I gather that the results have contributed significantly towards our understanding of inherited diseases. The Icelandic population is still entitled to free medicine, and I gather from my cousin Sula that some unusual patients have been in receipt of it.

One day in late summer, I went to the lot behind the station as usual and waited, but no one came, and I think I realized then that she was never coming back. I stood there for a moment, feeling lost and foolish, and then I walked back to the car and drove home.

As I passed the terminal where the Bergen car-ferry was disgorging its passengers, I had to brake quite hard as a sleek black car pulled out onto the main road. I made an obscene gesture at the driver, but the windows of the car were tinted black and I couldn't see whether or not he'd responded. I'd have taken his number, but there didn't seem to be any plates, oddly enough. An earlier paranoia flicked through my mind: if Anaheim del March had indeed discovered something curious in the Icelandic genome, and if they had chosen to share their information with certain government agencies... I tried to get a closer look at the car but it sped away, heading north into the long summer evening, and I did not see it again.

Liz Williams informs us that she has just sold her first novel, to an American publisher. Her previous stories in this magazine were "A Child of the Dead" (issue 123), "The Unthinkables" (issue 151), "Dog Years" (issue 152) and "Adventures in the Ghost Trade" (issue 154). She lives in Brighton, has a PhD in philosophy from Cambridge University, and has travelled widely.



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Memoirs of a Publisher

Ben Jeapes interviewed by Molly Brown

Ben Jeapes first appeared in *Interzone* with the story, "Memoirs of a Publisher" (IZ43, January 1991), an amusing first-person discourse on the process of setting up a publishing company. The science-fictional element came from the fact the narrator was an artificial intelligence named Oscar, but otherwise the story could almost be read as a how-to manual of publishing, littered with useful titbits on everything from warehousing to promotion: "It told me about the usual procedure – artwork supplied by publisher (or printer sets from copy); product is printed and bound; product is delivered to warehouse... I sent a message to the warehouse instructing them to deliver review copies to the various Times supplements and an assortment of scientific journals that I thought might be interested; I also sent notices to their bulletin boards alerting the review editors..."

And now, nine years, 18 short stories (nine of them in *Interzone*), and two young-adult novels later, Ben Jeapes, like Oscar, is taking the plunge into publishing with a new company called Big Engine... which was the first point of discussion in the following exchange of e-mails:

Molly Brown: Your first *Interzone* story was about a publisher. Coincidence or premeditation?

Ben Jeapes: Well, I was certainly taken aback by re-reading it recently (I did write it about 10 years ago) and finding a lot of similarities. Especially the ending: we learn that the whole story has been extracts from an autobiography called "Look Out for Serendipity," and serendipity has played a great part in my life so far.

But I suppose the thought of starting my own company has always been there. I twigged quite early on that the way to get ahead in modern publishing is either to go it alone or to work your way up in a vast corporate machine – there's no middle ground. And the latter definitely isn't me.

Anyway, I went through the public school system which teaches that boring, 9-5 Monday-Friday jobs are *verboten*; you have to go out there and Do Interesting Things. Even then I'd say the majority do go out into 9-5 Monday-Friday jobs and get swept up by the corporate system, but I was mug enough to take the creed seriously.

MB: You have quite a lot of publishing experience, don't you?

BJ: All my working life, which is to say 1987 to the present, has been in academic publishing. I started by spending four years in social science publishing in London, and that was where I learnt most of the trade and everything since has really been refining and honing. I left London for the clean air and lower prices of Oxford, and for six years I published IT jour-

nals. That wasn't the most exciting job in the world but it was a secure and steady background for me to practice being a writer. Then the company got taken over and all forward career progression ceased, so I jumped back to book publishing: this time medical stuff, with an emphasis on urology. I now know more about diseased penises than I ever thought could be known.

That was when I really began to have rekindled thoughts about going it alone, but I couldn't think what I would actually publish, and anyway I had a perfectly good, reasonably paid job to keep me happy. Despite what I just said, I wouldn't actually *resign* from a perfectly good job to start up my own company, good God, no. However, the job ceased abruptly in the first week of the new century. It was the obvious moment to go it alone.

But then there was that question again – publish what? And there was only one subject that I had any kind of entrées into, which was fiction. I know many people, and I'm sure you do too, who have written perfectly good novels that don't get published because, quite simply, they don't get lucky. They do the rounds and get the usual mantra of "it's good but it's not quite what we're after..." In other words, not



economical for the big publishing houses to publish. So here I am.

MB: When can we expect your first titles to appear? And what will those titles be?

BJ: I want to have the first wave of titles published by October so that I can take copies to the Frankfurt Book Fair – that's the Worldcon of publishing, for the uninitiated, where rights are sold and money in theory made.

First off the block are two debut horror novels by Gus Smith and Chris Amies. These are two prime examples of the kind of novel I mentioned, doing the rounds of the agents and publishers; and I have the advantage of having been involved in their writing, to a certain extent, since myself and Gus and Chris are all in the same writer's group.

Gus's *Feather and Bone* does an amazing job of taking the Northumbrian moors – the look and feel, the light and the air – and mixing it with forces of evil and madness that hit you like a slap in the face. And the way he tells it is with the rhythm and plausibility of a folk tale – which is appropriate because he's a folk singer, among his many other talents. He's also a farmer and he actually needed to do some rewriting because, in the original draft, he made strange, way-out predictions about BSE and CJD. And then these things actually went and happened, so he's now had to write about them in the past tense.

(If that doesn't grab you, then try this: child abuse, cannibalism and skinny-dipping lesbian witches. This is a novel which has everything.)

Chris Amies's *Dead Ground* is the novel H. P. Lovecraft would have written if he had ever made it as far as the South Pacific. Only Chris is a little more tight with the prose than old H.P. Like Gus, Chris is excellent at invoking an atmosphere; this time it's a group of Pacific islands which are the back end of the British Empire in the 1930s. Sun, sea, palm trees, the legacy of a vanished, stoneworking civilization and a modern feel of faded, rotting imperial decline which merges seamlessly into the much darker forces at work. When I read it I felt as if I knew every one of the characters. I wanted to thump several of them and I wouldn't want any of them to marry my daughter, but I felt like I knew them.

As well as publishing original material, I wanted to publish reprints too, for a couple of reasons: it keeps good books in the public eye and it provides illustrious company for the new authors, who can bask in the reflected glory. And the first reprint is David Langford's *The Leaky Establishment*.

Dave has done a fairly good job of keeping up public awareness about the title by mentioning it in every other *Ansible*, but it's long been out of print. I read it at university and I thought it was excellent; this was actually before I had heard of Dave from other quarters, so it came as a pleasant surprise in later years to learn that he was the author.

It's a very funny and frighteningly plausible story of bureaucracy and the nuclear industry, and right at the end there's a whammy that leaves you open-mouthed. The clues are all there throughout the book, but they only get pulled together at the end and they leave you thinking, "wow!" And then, "... and why not?"

When I asked Dave if I could publish the book, it turned out he had just finished getting it scanned onto disk, for a completely different reason. Dave also told me that, a while back, Terry Pratchett kindly offered to write an introduction if it would help get the book back in print. Terry has confirmed that the offer still stands. You see? Serendipity!

The other reprint is to be called *Swan Songs* and it's the first ever, as far as I know, omnibus edition of Brian Stableford's "Hooded Swan" series. This was six novels published from 1972 to 1975 – *Halcyon Drift*, *Rhapsody in Black*, *Promised Land*, *The Paradise Game*, *The Fenris Device* and *Swan Song* – and they were really quite unlike anything else Brian has ever written. You could completely miss the point and think of them as good ol' space opera, like the guys who plugged the original editions as "The Adventures of Star-Pilot Grainger," but the series is more insidious than that. It subverts the genre.

The background is that Grainger, a starship pilot, is rescued from a shipwreck on a far flung planet, and then finds himself charged for the rescue. And he can't pay. But the payment is made for him, on the condition that he becomes the pilot of the Hooded Swan, an experimental and generally flash starship, and each of the six novels shows him working off his debt, bit by bit, as well as facing a variety of problems to overcome along the way.

Grainger himself is a cynical pacifist with an amazing capacity for self-loathing and hating that which he loves. He's actually a free man at the end of the fifth novel, *The Fenris Device*, but for reasons which make perfect sense he and the Swan have one last fling in novel no. 6.

And finally there's a new *Interzone* anthology, *The Ant Men of Tibet and Other Stories*: yet more serendipity, because I called David Pringle to get Brian's contact details, and David told me about the collection. It was originally going to be published by Pulp Publications before they went under last year.

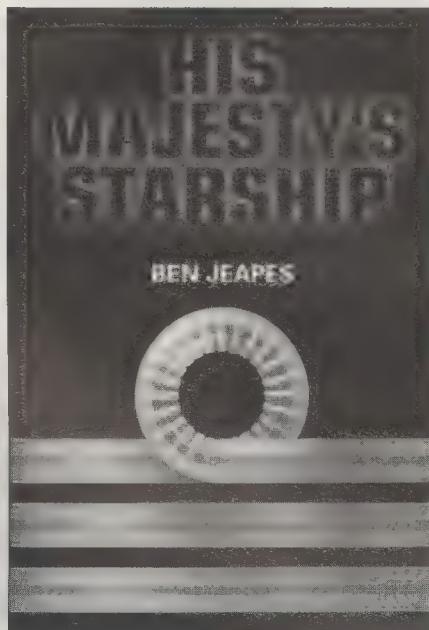
It has stories by Stephen Baxter, Alastair Reynolds, Chris Beckett, Keith Brooke, Eugene Byrne, Nicola Caines, Jayme Lynn Blaschke, Peter T. Garratt, Eric Brown and, um, another Brown by the name of Molly and it's a great cross-section of That Which Is *Interzone*.

At the risk of sounding, well, nausous it really is a pleasure to be able to publish an *Interzone* collection, since the magazine has done so much for me. Funny, thinking how ten years ago I was so desperate to be published by David. The circle is now complete, as I believe old Darth once said.

MB: Regarding your own writing: did you always want to be a writer?

BJ: I've always been writing – my memories of engaging in the activity go back to seven or eight – so I suppose so. The fact that writing can actually be a profession doesn't really impinge when you're seven or eight of course; I think I had to wait another ten years to start taking the possibility seriously. Though that might have been because it seemed an easier option than the tedious necessity of going to university, getting a degree, getting a job... (It isn't, by the way.)

MB: Prior to the publication of your first novel, you had 17 short stories appear in various magazines and anthologies. Which form do you prefer? Do you think of yourself as a short-story writer who also writes novels, or a novelist who figured the best way to break into publication was by writing short stories?



BJ: Definitely the latter; novels were always at the back of my mind. And indeed the forefront, for a while; everything I wrote from age 18 or 19 was intended as a novel, even if it petered out around 20,000 words. It became obvious that I wasn't very good at this and I consulted the Blessed Isaac and Arthur, who both seemed adamant that short stories are the way to break into the longer form. So that's what I did.

Of course, if you follow that route then you soon learn that they are two very different forms, but the basic writing discipline is the same: write early, write often, write lots. *His Majesty's Starship* arose from two or three different ideas – the inverted alien invaders scenario, the navy – that were all intended for different stories. They gelled into one novel while I wasn't looking.

MB: You're referring to your first novel. *His Majesty's Starship* is space opera, but it's a very specific type of space opera isn't it?

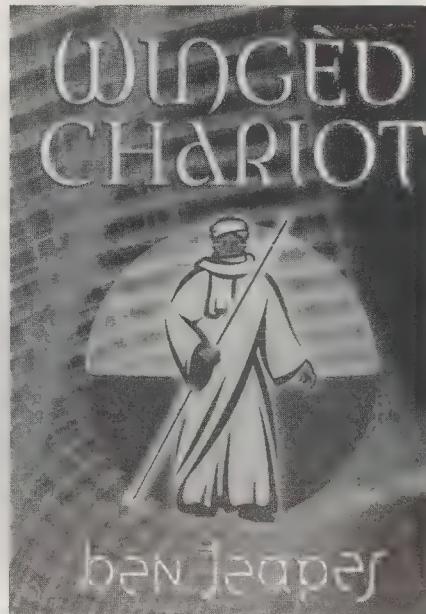
BJ: Hornblower in space was the idea... Though maybe that's simplistic. I had a strange urge to write about the Royal Space Force, or equivalent; and C. S. Forester's Mr H. has the interesting character trait of never believing he's any good. However successful his latest mission, however closely he snatches victory from the jaws of defeat, he's convinced that it's all fluke and his next mission will reveal him to be the fake that he is. (And in those days they shot incompetent naval officers, to encourage the others, which is never far from his mind.) So that was the template for Michael Gilmore, the main viewpoint character of *H MSS*.

The problem with Hornblower is that the same attitude emerges in every single novel, and by the third or fourth, or to be quite honest the second, you feel you couldn't get tired of punching him for being such a drip. So, I made sure Gilmore snaps out of it by the end of *H MSS*.

I also did a different take on the Peter Principle; the principle that everyone gets promoted to their level of incompetence. Gilmore's level is fairly low; he can handle small numbers of people, but not large. And for reasons he only understands at the end, that's his strength.

MB: Weren't you worried there were already too many Hornblower-in-space stories?

BJ: Since I hadn't read any at the time, no. When I started *H MSS*, I only had a vague idea who Honor Harrington was and David Feintuch's "Hope"



series had yet to be published.

Even if I had then it probably wouldn't have been a problem, though, because both those others are set well after the start of their respective "Hornblower in space" era. I wanted to cover the beginning. For example, why exactly would anyone want to arm a spaceship? I've yet to see a convincing answer to that; it just sort of happens. Another question: given that space is so big, what exactly is there to fight over? And why would there ever be a Royal Space Force?

Also, I wanted to bring the limitations of 19th-century naval warfare to space. I think the principles will be pretty similar if it ever happens. Ships were big and slow and couldn't hide. In Hornblower's day (unlike the laughable TV series: I think they misunderstood the term "warp" as applied to sailing ships), if you were doing five knots and your enemy came over the horizon doing five and a half, then sooner or later there would be a battle, but you could spend all day just looking at your enemy creep closer and closer without being able to do a thing about it. And there was nowhere to run to: when the fighting started, you just sat there and took it.

MB: When the fighting starts in *His Majesty's Starship*, it's quite a collection of combatants, isn't it? One of the things I especially enjoyed about *H MSS* was your projection of what the political map of Earth might look like in 2148, including such nations as: The Confederation of South-East Asia, The Pacific Consortium, The Holy Arab Union, The South American Combine, and The United Slavic Federation, among others.

BJ: Don't forget the Vatican. Yeah,

that was fun. Originally I had the entire planet neatly divided into political entities, and I suddenly realized to my horror that I was doing what Trekkies do – I was neatly delimiting and parcelling up a potentially fascinating future to make it manageable. So the published version names a few nations, but many more are now implied.

MB: And you made a rather interesting choice of villains.

BJ: The bad guys are the Confederation of South East Asia, which is a superstate India and its puppet satellite states; Pakistan, Bangladesh (I take credit for the first-ever Bangladeshi on a starship, I think); Afghanistan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Burma. Please understand I have nothing at all against India! But I wanted the baddy to be a global superpower of 2148, and I have no doubt that India will be one of them. Europe and North America will have long had their day by then. Whether India is a good or a bad superpower, only time will tell. In the novel it's just emerging from a mad and bad period, and there's a tension between different factions who have different views of the past.

Several of the Confederation characters are perfectly decent guys who just happen to have been born into this situation. I think that there but for the grace of God go many of us. That was why I gave the Confederation the NVN, an equivalent of the Waffen SS, who unquestionably are bad and not necessarily well liked by their compatriots. As I don't speak a word of Hindi, NVN stands for "Not very nice." Sir will have his little joke.

MB: And meanwhile, the United Kingdom has been reduced to a single mining ship in the asteroid belt.

BJ: Arf! Like I said, why would there be a Royal Space Force? Certainly not because the government of the British Isles wants one...

The UK's location, too, changed with the writing; it was originally going to be a crater city on Mars, ruled by the pretender to the throne – Richard Windsor, the man who would be king if Britain was still a monarchy. Which it isn't. The UK became a spaceship because I wanted the king to appear later on in the book, and the only way to do that would be to give him a starship of his own; and in that case the glory of Gilmore's eponymous starship, Ark Royal, would somehow be diminished. Somehow, making the entire UK into a ship didn't seem to be too much of a cheat. And as a review in *SFX* said, the thought should

appeal to the more treasonous-minded of us.

MB: The reason all these nations have been brought together in an armada of space ships is an invitation from an alien race called The First Breed, giving each nation the chance to "tender for the joint development" of The First Breed's home planet, The Roving. The idea is that each nation will send a delegation of unarmed diplomats, but the people of Earth being what they are, that's not the way things turn out, is it?

BJ: God, no. Quite apart from that making for a very boring novel, it really didn't need a lot of imagination to see how people really would react in such a situation. The humans trust the First Breed as far as they can swallow them.

Starfleet... well, Starfleet probably would take the aliens at face value because they all know that every alien race is basically Californian at heart, and so they would send unarmed ships, but actually sane people would arm their ships to the gills. The twist is that, subject to a little variation and wordplay, the invitation is actually quite straight. It's that little variation that's important.

MB: Regarding the First Breed, or "Rusties", I love the little details such as: when conversing face to face with a Rustie, humans have to fight the urge to pick the flakes off the alien's skin, and often mistake the nostrils on the top of the Rustie's head for eyes, so they end up concentrating on making eye contact with the equivalent of the alien's nose (if they had one). And you describe them as smelling like cheap aftershave. I can't think of a more hackneyed question than, "Where do you get your ideas from?" But in the case of The First Breed, I have to ask you: where did the idea for these guys come from?

BJ: All sorts of things! First, I played around with all kinds of shapes in my mind but they all came back to the "man in a rubber suit" syndrome; I could take them about as seriously as I can take *Star Trek*'s alien of the week. I certainly wasn't thinking of them as non-human. So I put them on all fours and, voilà, aliens!

And that helped me right a grievous wrong that was perpetrated upon science fiction in the early 1990s. There was an especially irritating story in Asimov's – and I'm talking scream-out-loud, throw-the-book-across-the-room irritating – called "The Nutcracker Coup." Quite apart from being nauseously cute and upholding the right of all decent Americans to

interfere in the affairs of less developed planets on a whim or if they get bored, it featured a four-legged intelligent race. And this race – get this – still carried things about in its front legs, so that if one of them was holding a gun on you, say, it hobbled along on three legs while it kept you covered. An interesting take on evolutionary theory, I thought.

I understand the story won some awards.

But anyway, once I had a quadruped race of aliens in my mind, I also had a whole list of things to do right about them. And bit by bit, the First Breed emerged.

MB: Your second novel, *Winged Chariot*, is quite different in that it is definitely earth-bound, in a distant future where enforced time travel has become an effective means of ridding the current day's society of malcontents.

BJ: The novel itself just sort of happened. I originally wrote a story called "Correspondents" (*Aboriginal SF*, Summer 1998); a reporter arrives in 16th-century Oxford to witness the execution of Thomas Cranmer. We learn that there are many of these guys, wandering the globe; they file their reports telepathically with an automated station on the moon, and they have bodies that can repair themselves almost indefinitely as well as one or two other useful skills. They have very little memory of the Home Time, whence they came, except that they volunteered for their assignment and that they have to wait until the 21st century to make the journey home.

Except that by the end of the story, it's fairly obvious that their recollections are a crock. And there I left it.

Then I wrote the short story "Winged Chariot" (IZ 118), which mentioned the Home Time but had no correspondents. And when I wanted a

subject for my second novel, I realized I had a reasonably thought-out background as a result of both the stories.

MB: *Winged Chariot* has an unusual approach to time travel; though there are parallel or alternate timestreams in the book, they don't exist independently, do they?

BJ: The timestreams you mention were more to make a point than anything else. They were inadvertently created by the inventor of the technology, Jean Morbern, when he made his first trips, before he managed to perfect "probability shielding," whatever that is.

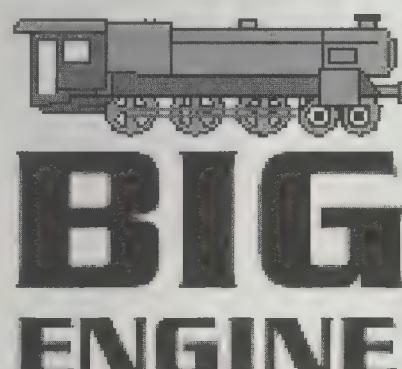
Now, in *Star Trek* or something similar, history would be put right again with a few special effects and everything would be back to normal by the end of the episode; no one would shed a tear for the millions wiped out, the billions who would never exist, because their names aren't in the credits so who cares what happens to them? Naturally, the needs of the ten or so lead characters take absolute precedence over the fate of an entire world.

However, Morbern wasn't a *Trek* watcher and he thought quite differently; so, one of the functions of the College that he set up to manage time travel is to infiltrate and manipulate the timestreams instead. By the time each alternate timestream reaches its own version of the 26th century, the College is in charge; then, when the Home Time is created in "this" timestream, the others can be spliced in and the surplus population redistributed rather than wiped out.

This is by no means the main plot, but it is there in the background. If you raise an issue in a story then I feel you should think it through and work out what happens.

The whole setup of the Home Time was for dramatic reasons rather than trying to show plausibly how time travel might be. Dramatically, there have to be limitations that the characters must work with. *Star Trek* (again) has almost godlike technology, and to make their stories remotely interesting that technology has to break down with monotonous regularity so that they can't just put the warp drive on and get the hell out of there, or beam out of danger. Far better to have perfectly functioning technology, but to make it hard to get at. Like, the Doctor's Tardis will take him anywhere and when, but he is easily separated from it. Likewise with Home Time technology: if you don't have access to a transfer chamber, or you miss out on the recall field to bring you home, you're stuck.

Then there's the associated issues of



time travel that you just can't ignore. The good ol' grandfather paradox; what is to stop you shooting your granddad? The tourist problem: if time travel is possible, where are all the time-travelling tourists? Again, these are just background details, but suggested answers are there in *Winged Chariot*. Like I say, if the issues are there, they have to be dealt with.

MB: Yet despite their apparent complexity, both *His Majesty's Starship* and *Winged Chariot* were published as "young adult" novels.

BJ: There are definite advantages to being published by a children's publisher – I got a lot of very good one-to-one editorial attention that concentrated entirely on the story and I was left to my own devices as far as the sf was concerned. And there's a good case to be made for the standards of children's writing being applied right across the board; you get stuck straight into the story, you tell it, and you stop. Kids are highly intolerant of waffle and wibble, and they are aware they don't owe the author anything. They don't feel it's their duty to stride manfully through his impenetrable prose, conscious that they are pushing back the frontiers of experimental fiction: if they get bored, they'll put the book down and not pick it up again, simple as that.

The biggest disadvantage is that bookshops just put your book straight into the kids' section. If someone visits the sf section on spec, there's more chance that they'll walk away with a *Doctor Who* novel than one of my own. Though given the proportions of titles in a typical sf section nowadays, even the best author's chances of beating the spin-offy are probably no more than 50-50.

MB: Which brings us back full circle to your own publishing venture. What are your plans for the future?

BJ: I'm open to submissions...

But, they'll have to share the vision. Eventually, and sooner rather than later, I want to be able to afford decent advances and royalties. For the time being, I can afford no advances and not very high royalties (the plus side is that the authors will actually *get* royalties, since there'll be no advance to pay off!). All the authors I have now are on board with this. It's a sad fact of life that until I discover the next Harry Potter, Big Engine authors will have to keep the day job.

I also want to retain as many rights as possible; not to rip the

authors off but to make nice little earners for both of us. I see publishing as a partnership; publishers need authors, authors need publishers; both sides commit to the relationship, both sides take risks to make it work. Anyone who doesn't like this philosophy is perfectly at liberty to pay my mortgage, pension and bills for me. Or to start their own firm.

But getting back to the point, the best way to make contact would be a friendly e-mail or letter with a couple of chapters and a synopsis. Entire manuscripts sent out of the blue, unsolicited and unforewarned, will be heavily frowned upon, and if they don't have the return postage then I'm unlikely even to look at them. Entire manuscripts sent by e-mail won't even get a look-in. I may even decide to name and shame offenders on the company web site, if I think it's getting out of hand.

For the time being, the genre should be sf or fantasy, or something closely related (for instance, *The Leaky Establishment* isn't exactly sf but it's close enough). I can't dilute the marketing effort by taking on other material. Eventually I do want to broaden

out into other genres – too many sf small presses have come and gone, and I think lack of diversity is one of the reasons – but I'll announce that in due course. And it goes without saying that I can't take media tie-ins – *Doctor Who*, *X-Files*, *Buffy*, *Star Trek* et al – because that's all copyright to someone else.

MB: What makes good writing? Or rather, what makes writing that you would want to publish?

BJ: I want to be led by the hand from scene to scene. I want to finish every page convinced that it's in my interest to turn the page. That doesn't mean the plot has to be Janet and John; I'm quite capable of being led on by the elegance and flow of the writing, even if I've no idea what's happening. But I've read far, far, far too much stuff where I have to take it on faith that it gets better later on. I've also read far too much stuff where it doesn't.

In terms of style, I suppose that means no experimental writing, please. I'll happily take on experiments that have been proven to succeed in other areas, but I don't want to be anyone's guinea pig.

I've even been asked if I wanted any autobiographical erotica; my honest answer had to be, "depends whose"! You can see from the titles I've listed so far that Big Engine will have a pretty eclectic list. Put the story first and let all else follow.

Other than that... well, the sky's the limit.

MB: That's Ben Jeapes the publisher, but what's next for Ben Jeapes, the writer?

BJ: At the moment I'm writing the sequel to *His Majesty's Starship*, probably to be called *The Xenocide Mission*. That ol' devil serendipity once more: when I took some chapters of *HMS* to Milford (an annual conference for writers with at least one professional sale; more on that below), the suggestions that came out of the workshop immediately opened up the possibility of a sequel that hadn't been there before. So I'm writing it. And I know what I want to write after that, but I'll keep quiet while I work out whether it's likely to work or not. I have plans...

(*His Majesty's Starship* and *Winged Chariot* are both published by Scholastic Press. Ben is also chair of the annual Milford Writer's Conference; details of Milford and his many other projects can be found on his web site at www.bigengine.co.uk. Contact Big Engine at PO Box 185, Abingdon OX14 1GR, or by e-mail: bjeapes@ndirect.co.uk)



Tracking unauthorized reprints is a constant struggle for writers. Molly Brown found that her *Interzone* story "Bad Timing" had years ago appeared in the Japanese *SF Magazine* without her knowledge or permission. Storm Constantine is another victim; investigation continues. Meanwhile, hordes of stories from *The Magazine of Fantasy and SF* were "licenced in error" by the producer of its CD-ROM library edition, and sold as e-books from web publishers Contentville: this stopped when authors complained.

TOURS OF THE BLACK CLOCK

Forrest J. Ackerman, founder of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine, won his suit against the new publisher Ray Ferry – who had effectively fired him – and was awarded not only the right to his old pseudonym Dr Acula but \$724,500 damages for libel, breach of contract, trademark infringement, etc. An appeal from Ferry is expected. Ray Bradbury testified for Ackerman and Harlan Ellison (for reasons of course *totally unconnected* with any old grudges) against.

Brian Aldiss received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree at Reading University on 29 June. The presentation address was delivered by Prof. Edward James of *Foundation* fame, who gleefully indicted *Billion Year Spree* and *Trillion Year Spree* as "seriously flawed" for underrating the importance of Brian Aldiss. This eulogy hailed the Aldiss/Harrison *SF Horizons* (1965) as "the first serious magazine of sf criticism in this country." I am unreliably informed that the British SF Association's *Vector* (est. 1958) will henceforth be billed as our country's first comic magazine of sf criticism.

Ian McDonald, gorging himself on octopus with *Interzone*'s editor in Gijón, Spain, was heard to say: "Octopi are highly intelligent beasts, you know. In fact, this reminds me of science fiction – it's like eating the alien." Not, perhaps, the right man to negotiate First Contact.

Charles Platt was unamazed by Robert Vaughn Young's claim to have ghosted various L. Ron Hubbard writings, including the introductions to all ten volumes of the dire *Mission Earth*. Interviewing Hubbard by mail for his book *Dream Makers II*, Platt had been immediately suspicious of the replies: "Vaughn Young was the aide I negotiated with. The interview that I received was in Hubbard's style, but I wondered if Young had written it – because clearly it had been typed on the same typewriter that Young had used in correspondence with me!" The

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

official story was that Young had transcribed taped responses, but after defecting from the Church of Scientology he admitted to Platt that he had indeed written it all himself.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Clarke Award. Sir Arthur's royalties must be in good shape, since the prize for the 2001 Clarke Award has been – in administrator Paul Kincaid's words – "more than doubled to £2001." Numerologists are pondering the occult significance of this particular figure.

Publishers and Sinners. *2000 AD*, the comic that gave literary criticism the long-needed words "Drokk!" and "Stomm!", has been bought from Egmont International by the Oxford software outfit Rebellion, who describe it as "a goldmine of intellectual properties." *SF World*, a new UK magazine with newsstand distribution, was launched early this summer in a blaze of non-publicity: "I was fully intending to do press releases and everything," confessed editor Steve Holland, "but got bogged down too far in the actual process of getting the magazine out (we were given seven weeks from a standing start to get the first issue into design, do a book, and to work out my month's notice with the people I was working for!)."

The Higher Criticism. William Friedkin, director of *Rules of Engagement*, rebuts an interviewer's tactful suggestion that the film's alleged anti-Arab racism might like a certain sf movie be excused as satire: "[Y]ou leave me with great doubt when you talk about this film in relation to something like *Starship Troopers*. Why don't you compare it to *Paths of Glory* instead? I will accept comparison to *Paths of Glory*, but though I've

never seen *Starship Troopers* I sense that it's a load of bollocks!" (*Independent on Sunday*)

E-Publishing. The curious thing about Stephen King's launch of his online novel *The Plant* (at \$1 per instalment, on the honour system) is that news outlets instantly released gloomy stories like the Reuters SALES OF 'PLANT' WITHER ON KING'S WEB SITE before any figures were available. When 76% of the first 152,132 people who'd downloaded part 1 dutifully paid up, King announced "The pay-through rate has been higher than I dared hope" and plunged ahead with the next instalment – but what does he know?

More Awards. *John W. Campbell Memorial Award* for best sf novel of 1999: Vernor Vinge, *A Deepness in the Sky*. *Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award* for best short sf of 1999: David Marusek, "The Wedding Album" (*Asimov's*). *Mike Resnick* became the first US author to win France's 100,000-franc Tour Eiffel Award for best novel, for the translation of his 1987 *The Dark Lady*.

Small Press. *Cosmos Books*, founded by Philip Harbottle and Sean Wallace, has become part of the mighty Wildside Press empire with Wallace as senior editor. Books by Philip E. High, E. C. Tubb and various younger Brits are scheduled for print-on-demand editions – including, reliable sources fear, the legendarily tasteless horror spoof *Guts* by John Grant and D. Langford (commissioned, enthusiastically accepted, paid for, and then silently dumped by Grafton Books in the 1980s). *Cosmos* is at 589 Park Hill Drive, Apt 8, Fairlawn, OH 44333, USA.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Metalurgy*. "It was a good job the Aston Martin was armoured with lightweight alloy twice the density of steel..." (Kim Newman, *Dracula Cha Cha Cha*, 2000) "In a cloth sling she carried a crimson torus that leaked gore like a wounded sausage." (David Brin, *Heaven's Reach*, 1998) "Out came the contents of his stomach in a heaving, gelatinous rush – the mixed grill he had eaten for breakfast at the hotel, the sandwich and the can of 7-Up he had had for lunch..." (J. M. H. Lovegrove, *The Krilov Continuum*, 1998) *Pre-Copernican Dept:* "The lurid light was as bright as the day of a planet circled by a red sun." (Barbara Michaels, *Houses of Stone*, 1993) *Dept of Unexpected Positioning:* "The sky over Vattown was a dull, flat, grey, and Ada Chichelski walked beneath it." (Anne Harris, *Accidental Creatures*, 1998)

The Bookshop

Zoran Zivkovic

The fog, as usual, set in swiftly.

Only a few minutes had passed since the last time I'd raised my eyes from the computer screen and looked out of the bookshop's large display window. In the early twilight, I had been able see buildings on the other side of the river quite clearly, speckled with the first evening lights. Now everything had suddenly disappeared in the thick greyness; not only the opposite bank but also the long row of horse chestnut trees extending along the quay on this side of the river, just a few steps away. Although this transformation had taken place almost every evening since the middle of autumn, it never ceased to fascinate me. One moment the world was there, real, visible, tangible; then, in what seemed like the twinkling of an eye it would magically dissolve in the humid breath of the river spirits.

I could have closed the bookshop and gone home. For days no one had entered the shop after the fog rose. In autumn the river reversed its amiable summertime identity. When the weather was warm, the promenade under the horse chestnut trees was thronged till late in the evening. Then I would often stay open until midnight, and sometimes even later, until the last customer had finally finished leafing through what I hoped would shortly be his book. The customer has always come first in this bookshop. But now I remained in the shop not only because the shop hours posted on the door obliged me to. I did not have a computer at home, and it seemed somehow inappropriate for me to write science fiction in the old-fashioned way, pen to paper.

But tonight I was not to be allowed to return my attention to the screen. My eyes were still gazing, unfocused, at the wall of mist on the other side of the window, when a figure took shape in front of the entrance, seeming to materialize out of nowhere. Its sudden appearance, unannounced by any footsteps on the pavement – unless, lost in thought, I had simply not heard them – made me start. Fog is apt to produce such eerie surprises, and I

disliked it almost as much for that as for taking away my customers.

The man who came in was small and slight, with a short, sparse beard and wire-rimmed glasses. Although he appeared youthful, his grizzled sideburns and the silver streaks in his beard, particularly on his double chin, strongly suggested that he had passed the half-century mark. I have a good memory for faces, so one glance was enough to tell me that I had never seen him here before.

It must have been rather cold outside, for no sooner had the visitor entered the heated air of the bookshop than moisture condensed on his glasses, fogging them completely. He stood by the door without moving, seeming to stare fixedly at me with large, empty eyes of unearthly blankness.

I pressed two keys at the same time, saving the text. This was not really necessary, as I had made no changes since the previous save, but that is what I always do, automatically, whenever there is about to be a break in work.

"Good evening," I said. "The fog is really thick tonight."

The man took off his glasses. He rummaged for a while through his long, green coat until he found a crumpled white handkerchief in an inside pocket and started to wipe his glasses. His movements were brisk and impatient, and left patches of condensation by the edges of the frame when he put them back on.

"This is a science-fiction bookshop." It was somewhere between a question and a statement. There was something strange about the way he drew out his vowels, as if he were a foreigner who had learned the language well, but still hadn't quite mastered the proper accent.

"That's right," I replied with a smile, "Polaris.' At your service. If it weren't for this terrible fog you wouldn't have to ask. There's a large neon sign above the entrance, but what good is it now? I paid a ton of money for it, but they forgot to tell me that it's completely useless in the fog. It would probably be better to turn it off. Drives customers

away more than it attracts them. Even when you're right under it, it just looks like a bright, shiny rebus."

Still standing by the door, the visitor began to look around the shop. He slowly skimmed the shelves full of books and magazines, appearing somewhat bewildered, as though he had entered some amazing place, and not an ordinary bookshop at all. All right, maybe not exactly ordinary – science-fiction bookshops are a bit special, that's true, but they don't usually induce such bewilderment.

"I'm looking for a... work of science fiction," said the man, after his eyes had finally reached the counter with the cash register and computer, next to the display window, where I was sitting. His voice sounded hesitant, as though he had trouble choosing his words.

"Then you've come to the right address," I replied cordially. "We offer a wide selection of science fiction – new editions and secondhand. We really pride ourselves in them. We've got some truly old books. Real rarities you won't find anywhere else. And should we happen to be temporarily out of what you want, we can get it very quickly. In two or three days at most."

The visitor finally moved away from the door and headed towards the counter. He stopped uncertainly when he got close to me, as though not knowing what to do with himself. I got a sudden whiff of a fresh, outdoorsy smell. It immediately brought to mind newly-mown grass. The man must use a deodorant based on plant extracts.

"The work I'm looking for is in this bookshop," he said. His tone had lost its previous uncertainty and become self-confident. Even more than that: he said it in a voice that would brook no objection. "And it's not old at all. Quite the contrary, it's just been written."

"In that case," I replied, "it must be here." I got up from my chair and headed towards the shelf where I kept the latest editions. "Here you are."

Seven narrow rows contained some 50 books that had been published in the last several months. Science fiction was on the upswing again. This time last year those shelves had held barely 15 volumes. I reached towards the middle shelf and pulled out a rather small book with a shiny cover.

"This is our most recent acquisition – *Impossible Encounters*. Might this be what you are looking for?"

The customer briefly examined the book in my hand, then shook his head. "No, that's not it."

"I suggest you have a look at the other books. These are all recent editions."

I left the visitor in front of the shelf and returned to the counter. People don't like you to hover round while they leaf through a book. It gives them an unpleasant feeling of being under surveillance.

My eyes dropped to the screen, with its tangle of words. The story I was writing was practically finished. All that was left was to read it once again and polish it up here and there. I would have had no trouble doing so in the solitude I'd expected until I closed the shop. Now that solitude had been interrupted, but I hoped the man

would quickly find what he was looking for so that I could concentrate on the text once more. I could not, of course, work while he was there. Not knowing what else to do while I waited, I pushed the "save" keys again.

My fingers were still on the keyboard when the visitor came up to me again. At first I thought he'd found the book he wanted, but when I raised my eyes I saw that his hands were empty.

"It's not there," he said tersely.

"You've already looked at everything?" I asked, unable to hide the note of disbelief.

"Yes, there are only 48 books," he replied in an even tone. If he'd noticed the surprise in my voice, he did nothing to show it.

I gazed briefly at the man in front of me, and then at the shelf with new editions. "Why, yes," I said at last, "only 48."

"Where else could I look?" he asked rather quickly.

"If it's a really new book, then that's the only place it could be. I don't keep them anywhere else. The other shelves contain older editions. Which book are you looking for? If you tell me the title, I can help you find it."

"Title?" The visitor squinted in dismay through his glasses, which were now dry. "I don't know the title."

"It doesn't matter," I rushed to assure him. This was by no means a rare occurrence. I encountered variously incomplete requests almost every day. "The writer's name will be enough. That will make it easy for us to find the book."

The man took his handkerchief out of his pocket once again and wiped the top of his forehead. He was clearly dressed too warmly for indoor temperatures, and beads of sweat had started to break out. I was assailed by another outdoor smell. Instead of mown grass it was some wildflower this time, but I couldn't determine which one.

"I don't know the author's name." A look of unease crossed his face.

I sighed inwardly. My chance of finishing work on my story that evening was receding. This was likely to take some time.

"Why don't you make yourself more comfortable," I suggested. "It's rather warm in here, and it may take us a while to find this work, with its unknown title and unknown author. You can leave your coat on the hook by the door."

The visitor shook his head briskly. "No, no. I can't take off my coat. I don't have much time. It's an urgent matter. I have to find that work as soon as possible. I can't go back without it. You don't understand..."

He said this very quickly, in one breath, and then suddenly stopped, as though for some reason he couldn't or didn't want to continue. A pleading look came into his eyes.

"I do understand," I replied after a short pause. "You want to find a specific work of science fiction and you are in a hurry. I certainly want to help you, but you have made only very scanty data available to me. All that I know is that it is some new work and that you didn't find it on the shelf over there. If you could tell me something

more about it, I might recognize it. I read a lot, almost everything that comes out. Particularly new things. Could you at least give me some idea of what the work is about?"

A smile played on the man's lips. "That I can do, yes. Certainly. It is about my world."

We stood there several moments looking at each other without speaking. I was smiling too.

"Your world?" I repeated, breaking the silence first.

"Yes, but you on Earth know nothing about it. Or rather, nothing was known until recently. Until the work I am searching for was written. Our star doesn't even have a name here, just a number, although it is relatively close, less than eleven-and-a-half light years away. But it's a small star, much less conspicuous than those around it, so there's nothing strange in it being anonymous."

I slowly nodded my head to indicate understanding, as if he were telling me something quite commonplace. So that was it. One more of those. Yet he hadn't the look of one. Quite the contrary. But appearances can be deceptive, as had been proved often enough. Clothes do not the eccentric make.

All kinds of oddballs visit my bookshop. They seem to be irresistibly drawn to it, and they constitute an ineluctable hazard of my chosen genre. I am most often visited by those who have had first-hand experience with extraterrestrials, and for some reason feel this is the right place to bare their souls. At first I entered into discussions with them, explaining that I class science fiction as imaginative prose. Their real-life experiences had no place in this category, for the very reason that they were real. As a rule, however, this distinction was too fine for them.

Then, in my naïvete and inexperience I tried to talk them out of it. Why go to the inconvenience and expense of shooting across from the other side of the cosmos, only to subject some commonplace citizen in an isolated house to unusual lights or sounds? That was when serious trouble arose. Not only did they turn a deaf ear to the reasons I cited, they resolutely interpreted my unwillingness to believe them as reliable confirmation that I, too, was part of the great conspiracy to hush up visits by extraterrestrials. That was the milder version. Several flying saucer fans accused me openly and rather peevishly of being an extraterrestrial myself.

There is no complete defence against such accusations. Indeed, how can anyone prove he is not an extraterrestrial to someone who can see antennae sprouting from his forehead? What arguments can ever shake the believer's blind conviction? But to me the primary difficulty stemmed from my profession. As the owner of a bookshop I could hardly draw distinctions among my customers based on their view of the world, so my hands were tied. Should I meet this type of person in some other context, I could solve the problem simply by raising my voice. A slightly sharper tone has a truly amazing effect on them. They fall silent at once and withdraw, often in embarrassment. But here, that would be out of the ques-

tion. How would it look if a bookshop-owner yelled at those customers who just happened to take a somewhat unusual view of his ancestry?

And so I resorted to the last means still at my disposal. Whenever an eccentric like this one drops in, I listen to his story with utmost patience, regardless of how far-fetched it is, taking great care to speak as little as possible. My most frequent reaction is to nod or shake my head from time to time, as befits the situation, to demonstrate that I am carefully following the story. This technique has often proved useful. First of all, the whole affair is concluded far more quickly than if one were to start a discussion; second, after baring his soul almost every single visitor of this kind ends up buying a book.

Over time this proved adequate compensation for approximately a quarter hour of my attention. I could almost have made this part of my price list: "The purchase of a book gives the buyer the right to squander 15 minutes of the owner's time in any way he sees fit." At first my conscience bothered me a bit, feeling this partook of prostitution; and then my business sense over-rode such improvident moral purism.

Furthermore, over time I came to see myself as a psychiatrist – a rather poorly-paid psychiatrist, it's true, but at least there was never a shortage of patients. Quite the contrary. There were so many of them that I could no longer rely on my memory, and had had to buy a notebook in which to write down what each one of them bought, so they would not accidentally buy the same book twice. This, to be sure, didn't bother them in the least, since most of the books were never read – occasionally I even found them discarded next to a nearby garbage container – but for me this was a matter of professional attitude towards my work. Every customer deserves the best possible treatment, and the handicapped get a bonus to boot.

But never before had I encountered a case like this. This was the first time that an extraterrestrial had visited my bookshop! Perhaps I should have been jealous. Up till that moment the role had been reserved for myself. Granted, the situation hadn't changed essentially. It was just a matter of nuances. My basic strategy remained the same: don't question anything and encourage the speaker to tell his story without holding back.

"Eleven-and-a-half light years," I said. "Why, that's really not so small. You had to travel quite a distance! It must have taken you a long time."

The man shook his head. "No time at all. It's hard to even call it travelling."

"I see. Did you spend the flight in hibernation, then? Is that why it seemed so short?"

"No, hibernation wasn't necessary."

"Oh. Then that means you must have a very fast spaceship. Judging by how quickly you got here, it must travel considerably faster than the speed of light."

He looked at me the way a teacher looks at a student who has blurted out an absurdity. "No spaceship can travel faster than the speed of light."

"Of course it can't," I said, hastening to correct myself. "How silly of me. I forgot that for a minute. Then how did

you get here so fast? Excuse me for not being able to figure it out for myself – space travel is not one of my strong points."

"In the only way possible. Using the fifth force."

It's not easy to carry on a conversation like this. One must keep a straight face, and there is great temptation to poke fun. It's even harder to suppress the laughter that is ready to bubble to the surface. But through long experience I have become very skilled in self-control.

"The fifth force?" I repeated, expressing the mild surprise I felt it deserved.

"That's what we call it. You know about it, too, but haven't yet recognized it as a force, so you use another name. Actually, it has several names. One of them, for example, is imagination."

This time I didn't have to feign surprise. "Imagination?"

"Yes. Imagination, fantasy, daydreams, whatever you like. The ability to conceive of something that does not seem to exist." He indicated the shelves around us with a broad, sweeping gesture. "All of these are the fruit of imagination, aren't they?"

I could only confirm that they were.

"And you are convinced that they are pure fantasy. You feel that there's no way the worlds of science fiction could ever be real. Isn't that right?"

"Well... yes..." I mumbled, finding myself in a spot. "I mean, for the most part... Although sometimes, of course, there might be certain coincidences... It's not out of the question... But very rarely..."

"Tell me," he said, putting a stop to my stammering, "how does a work of science fiction originate?"

I didn't reply at once. The conversation had taken a completely unexpected turn. Who would have thought that we'd wind up discussing the problem of literary creation? I have discussed many unusual subjects with the eccentrics who visit me, but never this.

"Well, I don't know exactly. My experience in this regard is quite limited. I have only written a few stories. I suppose the writer cogitates, and then an idea flashes across his mind and..."

"An idea flashes, yes! Do you know what actually happens at that moment – when, as you say, an 'idea flashes,' seemingly out of nowhere?"

Of course I didn't know, so I shrugged my shoulders.

"The fifth force is activated!"

The pause that followed was deliberate, a dramatic effect calculated to ensure that revelation would make the strongest possible impression on me. To demonstrate enlightenment, I nodded sagely.

"Unlike the four fundamental forces that exist on the level of the very simple, the fifth force appears solely on the level of the very complex. It can take effect throughout the cosmos, but in only a single class of locale: in centres of awareness of sufficiently developed species. In your species this centre is obviously the mind." The visitor tapped his head with his middle finger.

"Obviously," I readily agreed, tapping my head in fellowship.

"The fifth force is unrestricted by space or time: it acts instantly, by completely cancelling the distance between you, the emitter, and whatever point elsewhere in the cosmos towards which you have directed it. For instance, by activating the fifth force, you are able to see another world as clearly as if you were actually in it."

"I see." The most important thing in such conversations is to give the impression that you accept what you are being told easily and without scepticism. The more outlandish the matter, the more easily you should appear to accept it.

"That is the idea that flashes. If you don't really know what's going on, that the fifth force has been activated, it will seem that you have made it all up, that nothing is real. But actually, nothing has been invented. The world that suddenly appears in your consciousness is no less real than your own, regardless of how unusual it may appear."

"Very interesting," I commented.

"All these books here are considered fanciful prose, while in my world they would be regarded as commonplace documents of unimpeachable authenticity. Your misconception will be rectified once you have mastered the fifth force, instead of using it in the wild, uncontrolled manner you have until now."

"If I've understood properly, then this would no longer be a bookshop but some sort of... archive?"

"Yes, a place where data about other worlds are collected, stored and made available. That is my field of work. I use the fifth force to investigate other worlds and catalogue them. That is how I came across the Earth."

"And so you decided to visit us?"

He shook his head abruptly. "No, no, you don't understand. It wasn't that simple. The fifth force does not transport matter to distant places. Only information. Whoever uses it does not move from his own world."

"But you've come here to Earth, right?"

"That happened because of the interference."

"Interference?"

"Yes. When two fifth-force beams overlap."

"Aha, so that's it."

The visitor did not continue right away. He took out his handkerchief again and wiped his face. Several streaks of sweat were now streaming down his forehead, winding their way downwards to lose themselves in his beard. The vegetable smell emanating from him had become more powerful in the course of our conversation, almost intoxicating.

"When I directed my beam towards Earth, something highly unexpected happened. Another beam was heading outwards from here, in the opposite direction at the same time. Someone had just flashed an idea about my world. A writer of science fiction, obviously, using the fifth force quite unskilfully, because if he knew the slightest thing about it he would never have let it happen. He would have known how dangerous it is when two beams interfere with each other."

"Dangerous?" I replied, properly aghast.

"Quite so. Two beams that interfere create a gap in the space-time continuum. If this gap is not quickly closed,

it will start to suck in everything around it. First of all its two end points, Earth and my world in this case, then the planetary systems to which they belong, and then neighbouring star systems. There is actually no end to its voracity. It's as though a black hole has opened up, eleven-and-a-half light years long!"

I could only express appropriate horror. "Why, that's terrible! Horrible! Is there anything that can save us, or are we doomed to annihilation?"

"Yes, there is, if I am able to cancel the interference. It's still not too late for that. But time is running out."

"Then you must not hesitate," I said in haste. "How do you cancel the interference? What needs to be done?"

"I have to find the work about my world. Then go back with it and join it to my documentation about Earth. When these two fifth-force products are joined together, the interference will disappear and the gap will close."

"But how will you go back? Please don't reproach me, but I still don't understand how you got here." This was not exactly in the spirit of my strategy. I usually avoid unnecessary questions, if for no other reason than because they are quite likely to be answered, which needlessly prolongs the conversation. But I felt I owed it to this eccentric somehow. He had taken pains to invent an admirable story, not some tedious inanity like most of the others. Many science-fiction writers would envy him for this.

"Through the gap, of course. It can be used as a shortcut until it slips out of control. The crossing is instantaneous. I traversed all those light years in just one move, ending up in front of your bookshop. It was like stepping through to the other side of a kind of mirror, which was a new and very unusual experience even for me. I never thought I would ever go through a fifth-force interference zone. Although it may not look that way to you, I am really no adventurer. Although I spend most of my time investigating other worlds, this is the first time that I have physically left my own. Actually, I think that I am more of what you would call a bookworm."

A rather uncomfortable smile appeared on the man's lips, as though in apology. I returned his smile, suddenly feeling sympathetic towards him. In other circumstances, this could have been an interesting exchange of ideas between two fellow writers, even somewhat kindred souls. I really liked his story. Even the bit about the shortcut wasn't bad. Not exactly original, but convincing nonetheless. As much as I could see, there was only one weak spot in the whole thing. I could have ignored it, but the hairsplitting critic in me prevailed in the end.

"I had no idea," I said, "that there were humans on other worlds, too. Yet so you must be – at least, to judge by your appearance."

"Of course there aren't."

"Well, then, how...?" I asked, indicating his body with my hand.

"Transformation," he replied succinctly, as though this explained everything.

"Ah, of course. I should have thought of it. Under the influence of the fifth force, indubitably."

"That's right. It makes it possible, while it is in inter-

ference, if you know how to manage it properly. But only for a short period. That is another reason why I am in a hurry. I won't be able to stay in this shape much longer. And I don't feel very happy in it. It's very uncomfortable and clumsy. I don't envy you this body one bit. It's extremely unsuited for movement, in particular."

"Surely there must have been some reason why you couldn't appear here in your own body?"

"Of course. I would die within moments. This is an extremely poisonous atmosphere for me, and the pressure is very high. Rarely have I come across such a dangerous environment, and I am acquainted with a very large number of worlds. But even if the conditions on Earth were perfect, I would still have to take human form. Because of you."

"Because of me?"

A smile played on the visitor's lips again. "Yes, because of you. How do you think you would have reacted if I appeared in your bookshop in my natural form? Would you be conversing so casually with a ball?"

"A ball?" I repeated. A bell rang softly somewhere in the back of my mind.

"Yes, a ball, perfectly round and soft. What shape is more suitable than a ball in a world completely devoid of uneven spots and obstacles, and covered with dense vegetation? It's almost as if the entire planet were enveloped in a gigantic plant carpet. There is nothing lovelier than rolling on it."

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, but my throat had suddenly tightened. I could feel my pulse start to pound dully in my ears.

"And what a captivating smell it has! That's what is actually the worst thing about Earth. I could somehow become accustomed to all the rest, but never this foul odour." He sniffed the heated air of the bookshop with disgust. "If you ever had the chance to smell the fragrances of my world, you would never be able to stand it here again."

I feverishly started to think. This, actually, was not happening. It could not be happening! There must be some simple explanation. But none that crossed my mind made any sense.

"Smells," the visitor continued inexorably, "that emanate from the diversity of grasses that do not exist on any other of the multitude of worlds I have encountered to date. Lomus, rochum, mirrana, hoon, ameya, oolg, vorona..."

"...pigeya, gorola, olam," I continued with a voice deadened almost to a whisper.

The visitor's face lit up. "So that means you recognize the work!" he cried.

I recognized it, or course. It was truly a new story. So new that it had not yet been published, and thus could not possibly be found on the shelf over there with the recently-published works. It was a story that no one but its author should or could know about at this moment. A story that resided, saved several times too many, in the virtual space of my computer.

I nodded briefly without a word.

"Please give it to me. Quickly! If I don't hurry it might be too late."

As I slipped a diskette into the computer with automatic movements and pressed the keys to copy it, questions teemed furiously in my head. But I knew I would not ask any of them. Not only because there was no time left for him to reply, but also because I was not really prepared for the answers.

The visitor took the diskette that I handed him, examined it carefully as though his eyes could see into its contents, then looked at me and smiled again. He didn't say a word. I tried to smile, too, but it looked more like a grimace.

He turned around and headed hurriedly for the door. A moment later he was swallowed up by the thick wall of fog.

I stood there for a long time, motionless, staring at the impenetrable greyness that had engulfed him. And then my fingers hit the keyboard again. The tangle of letters disappeared from the screen in an instant, leaving behind a yellow void. The story that I had almost finished faded into nothingness. It left no trace behind it, just as the visitor had left no trace behind him. I could pretend to myself that I had never even written it, and that, as on so many other evenings, no one had entered the bookshop once the wispy spirits had made their sluggish ascent from the riverbed.

But I was deprived of this privilege to delude myself. The story had, in fact, been removed – just one erase had destroyed all earlier saves – but the visitor had left a trace behind him after all. It was very faint, yet undeniable. I noticed it the first time I breathed in deeply through my nose. A tangle of delicate vegetable smells of unknown origin hovered faintly all around me. It might be impalpable to other people, but as long as I could smell it I knew I must restrain myself from writing science fiction.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic
Translation edited by Chris Gilmore

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Zoran Zivkovic has written a sequence of short stories, to be published as a small book called *Impossible Encounters*, and the above is the fifth of them we have published. The previous titles were "The Window" (issue 152), "The Cone" (issue 155), "The Train" (issue 157) and "The Confessional" (issue 159). He lives in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

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Nick Lowe

You wouldn't have thought much could go wrong with a film that begins with the end of the world. But in terms of species destruction, *Titan A.E.* is a disaster of even greater proportions than its merely financial bomb-plop would suggest on its own. The directly-consequent closure of Don Bluth's animation studio at Fox not only threatens to end the career of the single most prolific and independent author of animated features in the history of the medium, but kills off one of the only two rivals to Disney as a stable for the genre within the American industry, leaving only the dependably erratic DreamWorks to come up with something that may one day challenge the monoculture of the mouse. (But don't hold breath. *Road to Eldorado II*, anyone? *Prince of Egypt: The Next Pentateuch?*) Given that Bluth left Disney in the first place because he felt standards of craftsmanship were slipping, it would be a cruel twist if his apocalypse was the last trump for the very art he championed — the tradition of drawn animation we now apparently have to call "2D" (to distinguish it from the CG and claymated media of Disney's and DreamWorks' bought-in hits from Pixar and Aardman respectively).

It's all a great shame, because despite its 2D characters, dialogue, and plotting, *Titan A.E.* is rarely less

than interesting, and at times much more. A conscious attempt to reinvigorate traditional tooncraft in the face of multiple challenges from higher-dimensional pure animation and CG-assisted live-action FX, *Titan* seeks a solution in an expansive attempt to marry animation traditions east and west. It sets out to forge a distinctively American dialect of anime, harnessing the Japanese genre's visual style and narrative grandeur to an idiolectic cluster of native Hollywood themes; and even where it fails utterly, as it largely does, it exposes fascinating faultlines between cultures and genres. *Titan*'s big idea is to use the tropes of Japanese catastrophe sf in the service of Hollywood's highest master narrative. A pangalactic Zionist parable, *Titan* boldly claims the holocaust experience for all mankind — casting the whole of humanity as the children of Moses, as the scattered survivors of the genocidal Drej's destruction of Earth attempt to found a new homeland in the promised world. Fortunately, our hero's scientist dad (cue industry-standard Hollywood dad angst) had the foresight to take a backup of the entire planet before the big delete-all, so the exiles need only follow the map to the hidden backup and hit the restore button for a complete homeworld to be accreted from space dust and seeded with the

genomic panspermia from the Titan's databanks. But obviously the Drej, mindlessly purposeful CG beings of pure plot energy, are hard on their tail, still trying to extinguish the remains of the species "because of what we might become" (why else?); so the species' survival is in the hands (literally, as it turns out) of humanity's beach-blond, muscle-witted last hope and the wisecracking almond-eyed Thai babe who stirs his beefy noodle.

As an attempt to find a Hollywood receptacle for the imagery and feel of high teen anime, it's an attractive failure. Bluth's Achilles spot has always been script control; even the most successful Bluth productions — *An American Tail*, *The Land Before Time*, and his first feature for Fox, *Anastasia* — have suffered from rather wonky concepts and/or scripts, and some have been real pups (*Rock-A-Doodle*, *The Pebble and the Penguin*, the wishfully-titled *All Dogs Go to Heaven*). The released version of *Titan* credits five writers (including the ubiquitous Joss Whedon), but it's hard not to feel that the contribution of successive layers has been primarily subtractive.

Nevertheless, the voice cast do their professional best with some dauntingly unspeakable dialogue, and the whole thing moves briskly along through "Go! Go!" escape sequences to the finale which harnesses pure plot

energy to power the ending by jamming two cables together by hand; while the visual design, by a cast of industry legends, is excellent, with authentically mecha action tools and consistently arresting digitally-modelled exotic spacescapes for the set pieces. Ironically, it's the foreground characters who let the ensemble down, their untextured blocks of flat colour looking as tired and unengaging against the spectacular backgrounds as their flat, untextured characterizations and dialogue do in the epic story. Given that *Titan*'s war to the death between 2D and CG species is a fairly open allegory of the state of Bluth's artform on the cusp of the digital revolution, it's particularly unfortunate that its prophecy has been so spectacularly self-fulfilling.

Instead of a new messiah who will lead the faithful out of exile and persecution to a promised land, Bluth and his team have been turfed out of their short-lived 2D homeland at Fox, which instead is going to shift its animation programme to its CG unit. But a Drej victory was always on the cards: "They're pure energy! You can't beat them!" Some you win, some you don't; that's how it is with genocide.

The *Titan* event had a curious genesis: originally a project developed elsewhere within Fox as a live-action film, and presumably attracting Bluth and his team in the first place as an interesting step on from their work with semi-realistic human characters in *Anastasia*. But the lesson of *Titan* may be that the arrow of evolution is

moving inexorably the other way, and that 2D animation on the big screen is looking more and more like a dinosaur in an age where digitally-rendered animations can pass seamlessly among human actors. So it's apt that *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas* should choose this moment in evolution to excavate the prehistory of toon-town's first first family, in a nostalgic throwback to 1994, the eve of the digital revolution in effects, when live-action versions of animated classics were still something of a novelty act, *Toy Story* hadn't happened, and *Jurassic Park* jokes still had a fighting chance of being funny.

Simply as a page of movie historee, it's underwhelming entertainment. A notional advantage of prequels is that they allow your characters to be recast with younger and more attractive actors. But whereas the original prided itself on some quite uptown casting (now all too old, too good, and too unaffordable anyway), the rejuvenated leads are a very uneasy mix, with only Jane Krakowski's Betty really comfortable in the shoes. (Actually Rosie O'Donnell is still in there, in the less thankless role of "Voice of Octopus Masseuse.") There's something against-nature about an English Fred Flintstone, however much Mark Addy gives on a scale of Hollywood percent (that sort of Fahrenheit scale, where 100 is just warming up); while Stephen Baldwin's Barney Rubble wantonly outdoes Rick Moranis in the same role as the all-time least convincing impersonation of a cartoon character.

The script, once again by a teeming

bullpen of writers credited and otherwise, is not so much plotted as diaried, with set pieces entered on a schedule and bridged by bald announcements of what the next scene's going to be. (Thus a scene that has run its comedic course is resolved by a messenger breaking in with "Mr Flintstone? Mr Rockefeller extends an invitation to you to join him at The Fight," an event about which not a word has been uttered before this line.) Even so, it takes Alan Cumming's unbelievably pointless and annoying alien plot-genie to hold the show together.

Nevertheless, it's an interesting movie about, rather than of, *The Flintstones*, delving further down into the darker layers of the original movie's dream within a dream within a dream: a TV sitcom in a fantasy pre-history dreamed up by the 1960s. For *Viva Rock Vegas* is the TRUE STORY of how your parents met, back in their weird cartoon part of history before the invention of classlessness and the abolition of all social problems in the healing embrace of the suburban family. In particular, it explains how your mother came to throw her life away by signing off her future to a dead-end like your dad. And what *Rock Vegas* explains is that it all has to be seen in the context of their youth in the very dawn of modern civilization, in the essentially pre-technological industrial society of the Stones age, when dinosaurs still roamed the suburban streets, and our primitive forebears had only just invented fun.

One of the things *Rock Vegas* brings home here with a vengeful bullet is



how unacceptable Fred and Barney's world has become to today's more aspiring youth. "We get to spend the rest of our lives working in a rock quarry!" gushes Barney. "Who says dreams don't come true?" But they do, and though Fred & Barn upgrade their lifestyle from bachelor trailer-trash to suburban family icon, history knows that that's as far as either gets; and that Wilma's descent from the heights of privilege to the bowling alleys and roller-diners of Bedrock is unrewarded by anything more than a life sentence of housework, nurturing, and drive-in entertainment. Thank goodness we don't have any of that patrilocal exchange of women in today's enlightened world.

Beneath the jolly caveperson antics, in fact, is a deep, dark terror of aspirational failure, of violating the codes of self-advancement. And what more inspired choice of theatre for playing out these anxieties than the place where the desperate classes go to dream and lose? You might imagine that in Vegas, of all towns, where rich people and poor people meet in a shared playground of common tastelessness and greed, all are equal on the big Wheel of Fortune. But *Rock Vegas'* message is that the luck you receive is in direct proportion to the size of the conspiracy against you, and that somewhere, in a control room back of your life, there's the evil yuppie out of *Tales of the City* throwing a big switch from WIN to LOSE. But it's all OK, as organized crime gets to break his limbs at the end. Who says dreams don't come true?

The Flintstone movies give a glimpse of a utopian world where live humans and animated anthropomorphs could all just dwell in peace in one big happy family. And *Stuart Little* offers just such a species-crossing fantasy about a live-action family adopting a seegee animated character – thereby incidentally recapitulating the ontogeny of *Stuart*'s director Rob Minkoff, who began his career as a toon animator, directing the budget-burning Roger Rabbit shorts before moving to Disney and *The Lion King*. *Stuart Little* is a truly verminous little film, bearing the adoptive name of E. B. White's pocket classic, but raised in an entirely different species. White's 1945 novel has been for generations a K-12 staple in the US, but (unlike *Charlotte's Web*) never found much of a readership here, so UK audiences are mostly free to judge the film on its chosen terms. But for those who were actually raised on the book, Minkoff's film must be about as close as American audiences ever get to the *Thomas and the Magic Railroad* experience: a national treasure brutally travestied into what uncomprehending

suitsmen have convinced themselves its fans would really prefer, like a dead and broken thing dragged into the kitchen as an offering from the family cat, its evil little alien eyes saying "I know this is what you want, even if you don't." For a few innocent minutes it looks as if Minkoff's film is going to respect the tone, if not the content, of White's humour; and then the Hollywood beast pounces and starts to play its cruel games with the helpless victim.

For White's *Stuart* has been chewed up and spat out in a furball of blood and bone, amid which it's just possible to recognize the names and species of characters and the idea of a boat-racing set piece, but precious little else of what's supposed to be an inviolable classic. The novel's increasingly picaresque tale, with its pleasing disdain for sentimentality, has been replaced by an all-new, gruesomely pro-family plot, and the original's dry, deadpan narrative ("It is almost impossible to catch a speedy invisible model automobile even when one is a skilful dentist") now gives way to slurping Alan Silvestri strings underscoring every mawkish line of dialogue. As a final inoculation against any risk of infection by irony, the end credits feature the vocal stylings of Trisha Yearwood (no! no! I choose the needle!) performing a ballad in the distinctive idiom of soft-rock uplift that movie end-titles have made so peculiarly their own, with the title/refrain "You're Where I Belong."

This ode to the family, like the imposition of a self-proclaimed "fairy-tale ending," is the exact opposite of the novel's conclusion. The original story briskly spans Stuart's whole life from birth to coming-of-age, when he abandons his family without a pang on an impossible quest that never comes to an end; and its final-act shift from city to wider world is neatly mapped to a movement from closure and triumph to dauntless disappointment, as the older Stuart's romantic dreams unravel in the pursuit, and with them all pretence at a plot. I've no idea what real-life fifth-graders make of this wry deconstruction of the tropes of juvenile fiction, and I don't envy the teachers who have to try to convince their book-shy charges that this is a satisfying experience they may wish to replicate. It's even tempting to wonder whether the film version might be a heartfelt revenge by the director and/or writers (including, bizarrely, M. Night Shyamalan), repaying their own suffering in kind by systematically dismantling everything challenging or interesting or amusing about the book. Whatever the motive, it's a startling demonstration that, as with *Sleepy Hollow*, Hollywood sees all literature as sufficiently extinct that everything is available for rewrites.

The most audacious innovation, of

course, is to make Stuart's tale a story about adoption, a topic of which the book offered nary a glimpse of the twitch of a whisker. Specifically, the movie *Stuart* is a parable about the compounded plight of adopted children with special needs, and their problems of acceptance, identity, and self-esteem even in the most idyllically supportive and nurturing family environment. If this sounds interesting and laudable in its own way, the best that can be said is that well, yes, it could have been, if only it hadn't decided to lie the issues away. One of the handy things about the adoption approach is that it allows having a differently-abled child to be a willing choice by the parents. And the great advantage of muriformity over (let's say) CP or Down's is that, if the older sibling is initially suspicious, it's easy to win him over by the display of all the neat special stunts that your particular differentness enables you to perform over ordinary mortals. As for the possible downside of adoptive status, that too is easily wished away. When Stuart (after a couple of days!) starts to wonder about his real parents, who they are, why they gave him up, and (when they promptly resurface) whether he belongs in their notably less cosy, white-collar, uptown nest – lucky he! for the mouse parents turn out to be impostors, and his real mom & dad happily squished in a vehicle accident somewhere in the distant backstory.

As ever when Hollywood sidles up to a real issue, the real issue backs away just as fast as its little legs can scamper. There are no real moral choices: you can have anything you like, as long as it's a mushy ending that affirms the family as the universal panacea and one true object of desire. And what makes it all particularly horrible is the way White's breezy can-do hero has been plonked into a lugubrious Frances Hodgson Burnett tearjerker about loveless foundlings denied the consolation of family till it's cranked out from the machine at the end. Even by the standards of Minkoff's Disney heritage, *Stuart Little* is brutally and cynically manipulative of unformed little emotions, as if twee sentimental reality-denial somehow becomes true if preceded by a heart-rending glimpse of how nasty the world really is. Optimists might counter that there's still space to do most of the untouched novel in the now-in-production sequel; but as the script has been farmed to Bruce Joel Rubin (he of such steely-hearted stuff as *Ghost* and *My Life*), the heart can't but sink still further at the prospect. It's instructive to see how toon people are evolving; but if this is where the species is bound, extermination's too good.

Nick Lowe

Snapshots of Apirania

Chris Beckett

This is a typical view of Apirania. Prairie country, the occasional bowava tree and here and there a hill standing out from the plain. But do you see that hill over there in the distance? That actually is a town on the top of it, a walled Apiranian town. It looks just like rocks doesn't it? Like part of the landscape.

Here's a closer view of the town. It's called Formara. Lydia and I got to know it quite well. The layout of it is pretty much the same as all the towns there: high walls, a single gate. You can see a couple of sentries up there on top of the walls. We're too close to the walls to see much of what's inside, but Formara is built along a single road that rises in a spiral from the gate to the Motherhouse at the top. You can just see there the top of the Motherhouse.

I know: it's all the same reddish colour, the walls, the hills, the houses.

This is a bowava tree. Now these have got to be seen to be believed. This picture gives no idea of the scale... Wait a minute, yes, this is better. That tiny speck down there believe it or not is me. These trees are immense and they pollinate in an extraordinary way. You see these orange things along the branches? Can you see they are above the branches and not below them? Well, they're balloons. Natural balloons. They rise up into the stratosphere and then burst, dispersing pollen over... well, I

don't know... most of the planet I should think.

This is a mootha. Moothai in the plural. Quite a beast, eh? But not indigenous, actually. It's a modified version of a terrestrial animal from prehistoric times: a brontotherium. The colonisation of Apirania coincided with what you might call the rococo period of genetic engineering back here. Reconstructed brontotheria were introduced as the main beast of burden. Enormous, lumbering beasts. Those tusks look nasty, but moothai are as docile as can be.

No, Apirania has no large indigenous animals.

And these are some Apiranian children. Sweet, aren't they? They all just loved having their picture taken. The boy here is Karl, the only boy in the family, and this is his sister Kara. This is Suka, this is Bavvy, this is Yar. Yes I know: they could be your next door neighbours, couldn't they? Apiranians look pretty much like us. The chromosomal differences are quite profound but they don't exactly hit you in the face.

But here are a couple of adults, look. Bunnoo and Thrompin. Men or women, do you think? Hard to tell, isn't it? Well actually they are both women, but they are sexually undeveloped and always will be. They are what the Apiranians call huthi, which really means Ordinary People. Huthi are about ninety percent of the population. They run the economy, they raise the children, they

defend the towns. Males (merthi – Wanderers – as they call them) are about five percent. So are the fertile women who they call manahi – or Mothers.

Bunnoo and Thrompin had a room they rented out. That's how we came to meet them. They were foster-parents to the children you've just seen. A sweet pair. They became real friends of ours.

Here's the two of them close up. Salt of the earth really – or salt of Apirania anyway. You'd really have a job to say if they were men or women if you met them here, wouldn't you? They are not just foster-parents to these kids, by the way, they are blood relatives too, aunts or cousins at least. Everyone in a town is related to one another because they are all descended from the same Mothers.

Ah, here are the twins again, Karl and Kara. Lydia took this one. Beautiful, aren't they? And so alike. Ever so close to each other too. When the family were all together those two would just sort of quietly gravitate towards one another, not necessarily talking to each other, not ignoring anyone else, just preferring to be alongside each other.

Yes, twins are very common in Apirania. Much more common than singletons in fact. Even triplets and quadruplets are more common than singletons. But it is unusual apparently to have a pair of twins like Karl and Kara, where one is a boy and one is a girl. Yes, she is a real girl. She only discovered that while we were there in fact. Her periods started. It was all rather unexpected and painful. At least the boys know what is in store all along.

Oh, this is just some of the balloons from the bowava trees I told you about. After the rainy season is over you see them all the time: hundreds of them in the sky at once sometimes, going up and up until they're just tiny dots. They often call them merthi, funny enough: Wanderers, that is, the same word that they use for men.

Lydia, would you like to open another bottle of wine? I think our guests would...

Now this is Apiranian technology at its most advanced! It's a wind-powered generator and every one of those wheels is cast out of iron. The Apiranians seem to have settled down comfortably at the early electric stage and never felt the need to move on.

This was rather a wonderful machine actually. I mean, look at those huge gears!

(What's that? Yes, thank you Lydia. I hadn't forgotten.)

As Lydia says, this turned out to be rather a distressing visit. We went up there with Bunnoo and Thrompin and their children. One of the kids had a pet with him, a little mouse, or the Apiranian equivalent anyway. The little thing jumped off his shoulder onto one of these big gear wheels. Thrompin only just managed to get hold of the kid in time before she went after it. And there was the little mouse sitting on a cog on that big wheel, not seeing its fate coming towards it until... Well, it was horrible. But it was lucky it wasn't one of the kids.

Now look at this. This is Karl and Kara with their mother, Diyoo. Yes their real mother. She comes down

from the Motherhouse to visit them. Isn't she beautiful? That wonderful bone structure. And look at that incredible long dress.

Yes, she does look sad, doesn't she? All the Mothers looked a bit like that, I thought. A rather restricted life, I suppose. In fact soon after this picture was taken the sentries spotted a band of Wanderers out on the plain and she had to go hurrying back at once to get ready at the Motherhouse.

Here she is saying goodbye, look. She's left Karl and Kara a little gift of cakes. They adored her. Of course she has other children with other foster-parents, but only these two in this house.

Right, well now we are up on the wall. There are sentries up here all the time – there's one you see – always looking out over the plain. They are not concerned at all about attacks from other towns but there's a constant nagging fear that the Wanderers might take over if they were given a chance.

I suppose if they came to a society like ours that would be how they saw it: a world where the Wanderers have taken over!

Yes, I know, an interesting thought!

Anyway, as soon as Wanderers are spotted, they blow horns and pretty soon there are horns blowing all across the town. Ah, look, here's Thrompin blowing one. You can see it's all a big laugh as far as she's concerned.

There is a real fear of the Wanderers but there's a sort of holiday feeling too when they appear. Once the gate is securely shut and everyone is safe inside the walls, the entire city goes up onto the walls to watch the fun. And it turns into a big party.

Here they all are, look: Bunnoo and Thrompin and all the kids. You can see that Bunnoo has even thrown together a quick picnic for them to eat while they watch. And there are other families behind them, look. Look, that kid there has got hold of a horn and is blowing away.

Aha. Now here is the band of Wanderers arriving below the wall. Quite a small band, only about twenty of them, and all of them very young, hardly more than boys. As you see they have got a couple of moothai loaded up with all their possessions. Look at that one riding on the mootha's back. Only about thirteen wouldn't you say? It's a hard life for them out there.

And look at the reception they're getting! Here's Bunnoo and Thrompin and the kids. And they are all merrily boozing and shouting out abuse, along with all the other huthi and children all along the wall.

"What sort of town put you little weaklings out to spread its seed?" they shout out.

"Call yourself men? You're just huthi kids who haven't had enough to eat!"

"No way are you going to get near our Mothers!"

Some folk even throw things down: bits of crust, little stones... Even young Karl is doing it, look. It doesn't seem to occur to him that quite soon he'll be out there himself.

And look how the young Wanderers stand there tak-

ing all of this! Poor mites. Twenty of them, facing the population of an entire town. Hungry too. When people threw down food scraps, some of the young Wanderers went to pick them up until the older ones reprimanded them.

Ah, now this chap here was a sort of spokesman of theirs. You see he's asking for silence so he can speak. It must have taken him all of ten minutes to get any quiet at all.

And here he is making his speech.

"Esteemed townsfolk of Formara. Open your gate to us please and let us visit your Motherhouse."

Something like that, and as soon as he's spoken everyone is catcalling and whooping and shouting out "In your dreams!" and so on.

But eventually the leaders of the town go out of the gate. Here they are, look: big fat huthi grandees in robes with their escort of huthi soldiers. They spend half an hour or so with the Wanderers, then confer among themselves. Finally the leader of the grandees turns and addresses us all on the walls. Look at her fine purple robes.

"Fellow citizens of Formara. We have met these boys and decided that we will open the gate for them tomorrow."

Howls of incredulity and disgust all round.

"What?! These pathetic specimens! I've seen more life in a limp lettuce leaf!"

That sort of thing. Look at the faces though. It's all part of the game. The Wanderers are never good enough. The grandees are always nuts to let them in.

Anyway, the grandee in purple holds up her hands again for silence.

"We will open the gate, but it will be for a gauntlet run only! We are giving these boys an opportunity, but they must prove themselves worthy of our Mothers."

A gauntlet run! Wow! The crowd erupts! You've never seen anything like it. They were absolutely cock-a-hoop. And pretty soon the wall starts to empty as all the excited huthi and their foster-children run back down into the town to start getting ready.

Ah, here are some more of those bowava balloons. I don't quite know how they got in here.

The toilet? Yes of course. It's upstairs and straight across the landing.

And now this is the build-up for the run.

You see all the huthi are jostling for space on the street outside their houses, trying to get a good position for themselves and their foster-children. These are Bunnoo and Thrompin's neighbours and their kids. We loved that little girl, didn't we Lydia? Five years old. Look at that grin! That's a basket of tomatoes she's got there. Her big sister has got a bucket of mud.

Here is Bunnoo, look, with her big stick, limbering up gleefully for the sport.

"Boy are there going to be some sore arses when I'm done!" she chortles.

(Yet you couldn't imagine a milder, gentler person than Bunnoo.)

Ah, and here are Karl and Kara, look, together as usual, with a big sack of vegetable scraps. Thrompin there has some rotten eggs. Everyone seems to save up rubbish especially for these occasions.

Here's a view of the whole street. It's all a big party you see.

Here is Karl again. Oh no, sorry, it's Kara. The two of them are so alike!

Down below meanwhile, the soldiers have done a bit of scouting around to make sure there aren't more Wanderers hiding out there somewhere, ready to make a surprise attack when the gate is opened. (That's always the worry. The Wanderers will take over a town, murder the huthi and set up with the Mothers. After all, no other human society has huthi! Remote as Apirania is, they are aware of that.)

Once the soldiers were satisfied there wasn't going to be an attack, the town grandees gave the order, and they let those twenty Wanderers in. We were halfway up the hill, but we knew at once when it had happened because of the shouting that went up.

Pretty soon afterwards the first of them appeared. Here he is, look. Poor kid, he was already covered in eggs and tomatoes and so on, not to mention bleeding from his head. And here is kind gentle Bunnoo if you please, running out to hit him with a stick and grinning all over her jolly face. Then more eggs and tomatoes and a whole bucketful of mud. And everyone shouting out that he's not a proper man at all and you'd need a magnifying glass to see his dick.

(He gave up pretty soon after, actually. He stopped and walked back down to the gate. No one harasses them when they've given up. Someone by the gate sorts them out with food and a jug of beer before shoving them back outside.)

But here's the next one. A bit more determined looking, isn't he? And the one right behind him was pretty determined too. He was the oldest of them and their spokesman the previous night.

Ah, this is another one who gave up.

"Well done, lad," goes Thrompin, who five minutes earlier was telling him he was the most pathetic excuse for a man she had ever seen.

"Better luck next time," says Bunnoo.

Poor kid, he was crying.

Only about ten of them got as far as where we were. The rest had already given up. As soon as the Wanderers had passed all the kids were running off up the narrow little steps between the houses that are a shortcut between the loops of the road. They wanted to chuck a few more eggs at any Wanderers who got to the top, and to see them go in at the door of the Motherhouse, if any of them got that far.

Only two actually did. The spokesman and one other. Here you are, look. (I ran up after the kids, you see, and managed to catch the moment when the door opened for the second one. Lydia wasn't quick enough, to her great chagrin. Not as young as we were, eh, Lyds?)

It's an imposing building the Motherhouse isn't it? Like the keep of some medieval castle. They hung out those

green and red flags in honour of the occasion. Green for fertility, red for blood I believe. Right up at the top there you can see some of the older Mothers looking down over the battlements. The younger ones are confined inside.

Here's a closer shot. You can see that the gauntlet continued right up to the door. Got worse in fact. Those are huthi soldiers there, poking this boy with the butts of their spears.

I know. He's really bleeding quite badly.

But as soon as the door opened the jeers turned to cheers. A couple of young Mothers were in there to greet him and lead him off to wash him and tend to his wounds. You can just see him there. It's a bit dark I know, but there he is, looking forward to a week of banquets and pampering and sex with every Mother he wants, before he has to go back out again onto the plain.

No, it's not a very good shot I'm afraid. Everyone was pushing to get a view and I was being jostled. You can't really get much sense of what it might be like inside.

Ah, yes. Now these are the Wanderers who didn't make it, back at their camp outside. At least they've all got something to eat now, and some new clothes and blankets. And the kids are up on the walls until all hours calling down questions to them.

"What town did you come from then?"

"How come you gave up so quickly?"

"What did you do to that bandaged arm?"

Look at their moothai tucking into that pile of cabbages!

And here is Karl on the wall, look. He's asking them questions about what it's like on the plain. Now that the excitement of the run is over it's all become a bit more real for him. He really wants some answers.

The Wanderers are telling him it's absolutely brilliant, and how they have been into dozens of Motherhouses and been with scores of Mothers – and how they just didn't really feel like it this time or they would have completed the run with ease. Formara's nothing, apparently, compared to some of the towns they've been to.

But look at Karl's face. What's going on behind those narrowed eyes?

Does anyone need another drink? Lydia, could you do the honours?

Yes, now this is a few months later. A couple more groups of Wanderers have been and gone including one group that was judged too large to safely let inside. And now it is the ceremony which they call the Tukanza. The Division.

You can see this is the Motherhouse again, but the flags are black and white this time. And here are the pubescent boys and girls going in wearing their black and white Tukanza robes. We weren't allowed inside, sadly, and people were rather vague about what went on. Actually I think the huthi honestly don't know much about it. They don't even seem to care. As far as they are concerned, the Tukanza is just a little quirk of the merthi and the manahi. Ordinary People have better things to do with their time!

Here are Karl and Kara going in. Don't they look tense? And small too, under that great towering wall of the Motherhouse.

Kara told me later that at least she would be able to be with her mother now.

Here are some more kids going in. You can see their foster-parents anxiously wishing them luck. Then the door closes.

I waited outside. This is the view over the plain. Even from the foot of the Motherhouse there's a good view in several directions. It must be wonderful from the top. And look at the balloons from the bowava trees. The wet season has been and gone and the sky is starting to fill up with them. Wanderers, the Apiranians often call them, merthi, just like the men. Have I mentioned that already?

Yes, it is bleak out there on the plain. Bleak and windy and dry.

Now, here they are coming out again. Haven't they changed? Kara has been told that in another month she'll be moving in there. And then Karl and the other boys of his age will be turned out onto the plain with a moothai or two and some provisions, and an exhortation to respect all Mothers and never besmirch the reputation of Formara, though they are never ever to return there.

Look at the strain in their faces. The others are crowding around them trying to make a fuss of them but Karl and Kara are far, far away. Another month and they'll have to say goodbye to each other and never meet again.

What's this? Oh, it's that mouse on the gear wheel just before... (Why did you take that picture Lydia, for goodness sake?)

Now look at these balloons. It's an Apiranian custom after the Tukanza. Bunnoo and Thrompin gathered them from a bowava tree (not an easy thing to do!) and they gave them to Karl and Kara to release them from the square in front of the Motherhouse.

Here they are – look, Karl and Kara releasing them one by one, while all the others watch and cheer. Look at those balloons going up into the sky, to join all the others that are blowing past.

Look: a couple quite low and then three more – can you see them? – high, high up among the clouds.

More drinks anyone? Are you hungry? Would you like anything else to eat?

We've got some pictures from our trip to Pazzazza up in the Pleiades that we haven't shown you.

Now that was something really special.

Chris Beckett's most recent stories in *Interzone* were "The Marriage of Sky and Sea" (issue 153), "The Gates of Troy" (issue 154) and "The Welfare Man Retires" (issue 158). A former social worker, living in Cambridge, he is the author of many previous stories, several of which have been anthologized.

Green Dreams, with Explosions

Steven Gould & Laura J. Mixon

interviewed by Jayme Lynn Blaschke

From the high desert writers' enclave of Albuquerque, New Mexico, the husband-and-wife team of Steve Gould and Laura J. Mixon have established themselves as two of the most promising new novelists of recent years. Gould made a name for himself in the 1980s with his short fiction, landing on the final ballot twice for the Hugo award and once for the Nebula. Mixon has produced a number of attention-getting novels, notably 1992's *Glass Houses*, 1998's *Proxies*, and *Facing*, the first volume of a forthcoming series of sf novels collectively called *Burning the Ice*. Gould's critically-acclaimed novels include *Jumper*, *Wildside*, *Helm* and his latest work, *Blind Waves*. In 1997 the pair released their first collaboration, the near-future techno-thriller *Greenwar*.

Your joint novel, *Greenwar*, was different from the work either of you had done in the past. What brought that about?

Mixon: Patrick Nielsen Hayden, my editor at Tor Books, read *Glass Houses* and said he had a project for me that was a pet project of his publisher – the environmental thriller. He believed that if they got the right book out there, they could really have a new exciting genre. This was a big thing he wanted to make happen. I said "Hmm, it's an interesting idea – I'll give it some thought." So I started bouncing ideas around Steve. We both discovered that he had a whole bunch of stuff to bring to the project, and that it really was turning into a collaboration. I think we were both intrigued by the challenge of doing a techno-thriller. I think there's a significant affinity between techno-thrillers and science fiction, but there's a significant difference, and we wanted to give it a try.

From the title alone, *Greenwar* is obviously inspired somewhat by Greenpeace. What's the connection there?

Gould: I think it clearly comes in. Greenpeace is the perfect example, and the reason why we called it *Greenwar*, obviously is a play off Greenpeace. Because we're talking about civil disobedience, but what the book also discusses, is the point where civil disobedience becomes criminal and terrorist behaviour. We're covering some of the ground that Edward



Photo: Lisa Elliott Blaschke

Abbey did in *The Monkeywrench Gang*. One of the characters is an ex-Greenpeace member, and has now become an investigative enforcement agent for the Environmental Protection Agency. The other major character is the designer of this offshore facility, this benign technology – ocean thermal-energy conversion facility – that turns out to be the target of the terrorists.

How real is this technology?

Gould: Oh, this technology has existed for over 30 years. There's a major plant on the shore of the big island of Hawaii. For this technology to work perfectly, you have to have a temperature difference between deep water and surface water of a minimum of 36 degrees. What happens is you use the warm water to vaporize a refrigerant – say ammonia or freon or something like that – and the cold water to condense it. You drive the turbines with the evaporation. In effect, it's solar power, because the water temperature is driven by solar heating on the surface, with cold water down below.

Mixon: I believe that all alternate energy power sources are going to become much more widespread. They're in some ways much cheaper, for a number of reasons much more viable. In many parts of the world, in fact, wind power is now competitive with the traditional, carbon-based power sources. Because in order to have a sustainable economy, we can't use up everything – we're going to hit a brick wall eventually. So what is that

transition going to be like? That was one of the things we were playing with.

So you're both developing a more overt social consciousness in your writing?

Mixon: Well I don't think you can have a good story if you focus too much on any kind of message. I think the book has to be about the people, and it has to be about the things that you care about. What comes first has to be the story and characters. But there's no doubt that any writer worth their salt is going to be writing about things they care about. Steve, any thoughts? No thoughts? He just likes to blow things up.

So all the explosions are attributed to Steve?

Gould: Seriously. Every single one. In the very front of the book, it talks about, to a certain extent, how we did the collaboration. And one of the things it says is that I wrote certain key diving scenes because while Laura is now a certified diver, I have far, far more years experience diving. So I wrote a lot of the diving scenes and I wrote the explosions.

Steve, your latest solo book, *Helm*, touches on a lot of these same issues, doesn't it?

Gould: *Helm*'s about the destruction of the Earth's ecosystem, the entire ecosphere. Billions of people dead. And there are like 7,000 people on the moon in facilities designed for 900 people or so. From there, with that cheery beginning, it jumps 350 years and 28 light years. It has a young-adult protagonist. It has multiple viewpoints – it's not a first-person novel like my other two novels, and its got a lot of Aikido, which is one of my interests.

Another young-adult protagonist? Your first two books, *Jumper* and *Wildside*, had strong young-adult appeal as well.

Gould: There is no doubt whatsoever that I have been deliberately trying to walk a line between young-adult and adult fiction. I'm not trying to exclude anybody. I very much try to include adult readers, but I also try to write books that will appeal to younger readers who can identify with the characters. Because, as you said, we're looking at 16-, 17-, 18-year-old protagonists. In fact, *Wildside*, my second book, was awarded the Hal Clement Award for best young-adult science-fiction novel.

Mixon: I wanted to comment that I don't see you as so much walking a

line or not excluding adults. I see you, in your fiction, as *including* younger readers in stories that are appealing to a broader adult readership. You start in a position that is adult, and you broaden the concept to include things that are going to appeal as well to younger readers.

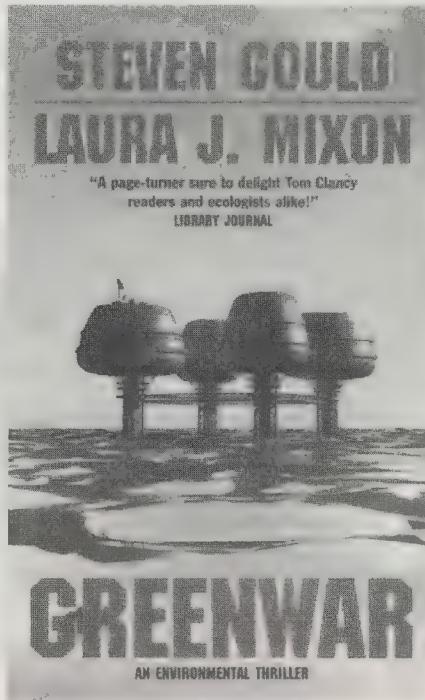
Gould: I get equal recognition from both. I get lots of e-mail from adults, a lot of nice ego-stroking from the adults. But those books were also chosen by the National Library Association as best books for young adults. There are like 90 books selected each year, but only five or six of them are from within our genre. Both *Jumper* and *Wildside* were chosen, so that's a very nice thing.

You mentioned earlier that you are certified scuba divers. How did you get involved with diving?

Gould: When I was in junior high, my father – he's a military officer – was stationed at Fort Shafter in Hawaii. He had a three-year tour of duty in Oahu, and we went diving every weekend. In fact, the entire family got certified, but my mother can't stand to get deeper than... If she can't put her hand out of the water, she starts to panic. So even though she went through the certification process, she kind of lost it on the check-out dive and never really did more than snorkel. But everyone else in my family scubas.

And that's carried over to the next generation?

Mixon: That's right. Emma keeps asking "So, when can I scuba dive?"



Gould: We haven't really been able to scuba dive since before the girls were born.

Mixon: But we hope to get back into it when the girls are a little older.

So what's the most memorable dive you've been on?

Mixon: It was my first big diving trip. We took this long boat ride out to these islands, we go underwater – Steve and I, we're diving buddies – and we come around this corner. And there's this sheer cliff that goes down over a hundred feet. We're floating there, and all the sudden I look over at the wall beside us. There's all these little cones, millions of them, with little black eyes. Little heads come out, and they're red. They're fish, little red fish with black eyes. An entire, enormous wall of little fish staring at me. It was a fish condo. And there were these little crabs walking around. It was such an incredible experience.

Gould: I was diving off Cozumel and, especially in the warmer areas, you get this surface layer of phytoplankton, which is kind of foggy and not as clear, like right at the surface, possibly as much as ten feet deep. We went into the water, and coming down through the phytoplankton it opens up down below, because the sunlight doesn't penetrate and they don't congregate there. We're over this reef face that goes down. From one side it's like 50 feet down from the surface, and on the other, it's 3,000 feet deep. And you could see a shaft of light coming down because of the layers opening up above. This light was stabbing down, and I could see easily 200 feet down the face of this cliff. I really had a sudden moment of panic, because the water is so clear that it really feels like you're suspended, you're hanging, and any minute whatever's holding you up is going to go away and you'll go plunging down into this eternal abyss. Flying is probably the thing I most like about diving – especially free diving, without scuba tanks.

You seem to like undersea settings, Steve. *Blind Waves* has a kind of Atlantis motif, doesn't it?

Gould: It's a fast-paced, hi-tech, futuristic thriller set near drowned Galveston Island off the Texas coast. It's sprinkled lightly with shades of Shakespearean romantic comedy!

You've both collaborated with other writers before on short fiction – Steve with Rory Harper, and Laura with Melinda Snodgrass. How is that different from

working with your spouse?

Mixon: Well, when you write for yourself, all of the arguments are inside your head. When you write with somebody else, you have to both come to a consensus. We didn't have knock-down drag-out fights, but there was definitely this period where we had to work hard at coming to some kind of method that we were going to use to come to agreement and carry things forward that really satisfied both of us.

Gould: I didn't find it all that much different from working with Rory – but Rory's a really good friend. There was a lot of respect involved, and we had similar levels of experience as writers. I imagine it was different for Laura working with Melinda, who has a different kind of writing experience.

Mixon: Well, she's got a lot of collaborating experience, so I may have learned some of those tricks about collaboration from Melinda. She's so much the professional. She's so easy to work with. She's just got so much creativity. The thing is, you have to be really flexible and you have to be willing to work with the other person and forget the other person's idiosyncrasies.

Gould: I don't have any idiosyncrasies!

Mixon: Of course not, dear. That's why it was so easy to collaborate with you.

According to conventional wisdom, writers shouldn't be married to writers. It seems to work for you, though.

Gould: Well, the problem with being married to another writer – there's a couple of issues there. One of the problem issues is economics. Essentially it's a situation that occurs in the two-freelancer households. When one member of the partnership has a steady income, such as a regular job, that steadiness will offset the *extreme* irregularity of the writing life.

Mixon: It's very hard, and that can make a strain. As they say, financial strain is the single leading cause of divorce, because that kind of strain is extremely difficult to deal with.

Gould: There's also some problem with two people who are "creative." I don't know if we've run into that, *per se*, but when people are working on projects – especially when they're deep into a project – they're very distracted, it's hard to concentrate on anything else, and sometimes it's hard for them to put what they need into the relationship and family to keep it going. So

when you have two people doing this at the same time...

Mixon: I think one of the wonderful things about being in a partnership with another writer is that we understand that. We can cover for each other. There's no sense of resentment that "Oh, he's just goofing off" or "She's not pulling her weight."

Gould: If they're lying on the couch with their eyes closed –

Mixon: – as long as they're not snoring –

Gould: – they could be working. They could easily be working, and they need to be left alone and not pestered about the dishes.

Mixon: We share an office, and there's this really nice feeling when you work at home. Writing is a very lonely profession, and when you write books, you don't get feedback for years. When I was an industrial engineer, I got feedback on a daily basis. It can be very lonely, and to have somebody right there in the office working too... I look up and I look over, and I just kind of smile. So I think the thing about "don't marry a writer" is – they're full of it. I think the smartest thing I ever did was to marry a writer. Period.

You both write full-time. How difficult was it to take the plunge to become a full-time writer?

Gould: It's a very hard thing to do, especially with the contemporary publishing scene. It is not very easy to make the break. Laura and I moved to New York City when she got this really big job opportunity, a lifetime opportunity to be vice-president of environmental affairs for a very large company. So I was able to stop working for a while and just write, and during that time I got to finish *Jumper*.

Mixon: I think for me, the decision to go full-time was very easy. The implementation of it was *extremely* difficult. Steve's first book came out in 1992, and we started hearing it was doing well in '93. By that time he'd already sold *Wildside* and was working on it, so there was just this incredibly long lag-time before we knew, yes, his career's going to be strong enough for us to afford for me to quit my job and get my career going. But living in New York, we knew we couldn't afford for me to leave that job and for us to stay there. So then we had to figure out how we were going to get out, and when. It was really tough getting out of New York and getting settled in a place where we could afford to live and be freelancers.

Gould: It might've been easier if we hadn't had two kids right around that time.

Mixon: But that's not something that I at all regret. In many ways having kids gives you all kinds of life experience, and the opportunity to sort of see a human being from the ground up.

Raising children is a full-time job in and of itself. How does this writing household operate on a daily basis?

Gould: To maintain some sort of sense of fairness, we have to schedule fairly vigorously. We have a little written schedule of who's turn it is to write and who's turn it is to watch the kids. For a while we also paid for childcare, but that just gets too expensive, and so instead we've developed links to other parents. There's a lot of childcare swapping with our friends, and we'd like to do more.

Mixon: The hardest thing about being a freelancer is lack of structure. So if you have parenting responsibilities that you're sharing with somebody else, and you build a schedule, you have instant structure. Children need routine and children need structure, so you can actually make it work to your advantage. We've perfected the art of tag-team parenting.

You both had distinctive debuts. Laura's novel *Glass Houses* was serialized in *Analog*. What did that do for you?

Mixon: That was my second novel. My first novel was actually *Astropilots*, which came out from Scholastic and Omni back in 1987. *Glass Houses* was my first adult sf, so I think it's fair enough to call it a debut novel. I think it was a help to me, to keep me motivated, when I was able to sell it to *Analog* as well as to Tor. And it got a lot of very good reviews, which was unusual for a paperback to get that kind of attention. It helped to reaffirm my desire to be a writer. My full-time job in New York, which was a very high-pressure office job, and my desire to have kids made it hard to be a writer. I would get 15 minutes a night to write a single paragraph, spending all my weekends, taking every moment I could to do writing. There was this long period where I was just toiling and toiling and toiling. I wrote much of the first draft of *Greenwar* that way in New York. It was like the long dark time of the soul, literally, because I was doing most of my writing at night after Emma was in bed. I was often so exhausted, and just pushing myself to keep going. And the fact

that *Glass Houses* had gotten such very good critical attention, I think, helped me go through this time.

Steve, before you started writing novels, you'd developed a strong reputation as a short-story writer. That began back when Theodore Sturgeon helped you get your first sale.

Gould: I don't know how much actually he was responsible for getting the sale, but he was definitely someone who suggested I send this story off to *Analog*. He read it at an early AggieCon as part of a writer's workshop, and was very encouraging at that time, and I was always very grateful to him. Interesting enough that my debut was also in *Analog*. In fact, Laura had met Stan Schmidt, the editor of *Analog*, socially through me, before she ever sent *Glass Houses* to him. By this time I'd sold half of my short fiction, over ten years, to Stan Schmidt. Then we moved to New York City where we were within driving distance of where he lived, and we did a couple of outdoorsy things together. We tubed the Esopus. It sounds like a medical procedure, but it's a particular river in Upstate New York where you can go tubing through rapids.

Now that you are a novelist, do you miss writing short fiction?

Gould: I do miss it. I do miss writing short stories, and I've made a definite decision that the next thing I write will have sections that will be sellable as short fiction.

Mixon: I've tried that, and I don't have it. Of course, I've never really had the knack for short stories. *Glass Houses* was my version of a short story. I started it out as a short story, and it ends up as a short novel. I think it's because Steve's got the skill. He knows how to craft a short story, so I believe he can write a novel and have extractable sections in it.

Laura, your last book was *Proxies*, one that was a long time in the making. Would you call it a labour of love?

Mixon: Yeah. I got the original concept in 1982, and started the book in 1984. I think that because it was a very complex book, it took me a while to really have the chops to handle that kind of complexity and pull it off.

And your new series, *Burning the Ice*, is a sequel to *Proxies*?

Mixon: The book is set in the same universe as *Proxies*, which takes place about 150 years later. It's a first-contact, telerobotic intrigue set on the icy moon of a Jovian world dozens of light-years from Sol. I've definitely been influenced by the Europa stuff, and by recent explorations of the deep ocean thermal vents on Earth. The working title is *Facing*. It will be the first in a planned series of sf novels tentatively titled *Burning the Ice*. All my adult sf books so far have been in the same universe, and *Facing* is a true sequel to *Proxies* in that it has some of the same characters and follows on the events of the other book. But the five (or perhaps six) books of this series I'm starting will form a specific set of stories that have a definite arc.

With both of your solo careers in full swing, does the future hold any more collaborations?

Mixon: If we came up with an idea that we both had something to say about. But right now I think—

Gould: —we each have visions, things we want to do on our own. It's hard to maintain those visions in a collaborative format.

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October 2000

Orchids in the Night

Jean-Claude Dunyach

My acquaintance with Professor Challenger began with a killing and ended with one of the century's strangest acts of bravery. He was a most annoying young man, full of himself and irritatingly self-assured despite his lack of worldly experience. But I must admit he proved his worth in a pinch. Though it pains my Frenchman's soul to admit it, there is something to be said for English grit.

The final days of the summer of 1890 were nothing less than stifling. My good town of Toulouse, so pleasant in the spring, turns into a furnace when the August sun beats down upon it. The bricks hoard the day's heat and release it after sunset. Clouds of flies buzz around the droppings of the horses pulling drays and hansoms. And, worst of all, summer is also when the Museum attracts idlers in their Sunday best, crowding into the gardens for a stroll or a visit. If I close my one and only window, right above the Palaeontological Gallery, my study can become a veritable Turkish bath. If I open it, the yelling of the children outside keeps me from concentrating.

However, in this particular case, I had no trouble shutting out the din. I was rereading the letter Charlus, our caretaker, had brought me earlier, asking if he might keep the Queen Victoria stamp for his collection:

Mon cher Frédéric,

The news you've given me is so astonishing and unbelievable that I would have taken it for an ill-inspired jest from anybody else but you. However, I know you well enough to trust you implicitly.

Therefore, I am coming, just as you wished. As soon as I finish packing and scrawling these few words, I will be on my way and look forward to the pleasure of seeing you again.

Do you remember Sussex? Our mutual friend is unfortunately otherwise occupied – I've been given to understand a certain lady has claimed his services most imperiously – but I've presumed to take with me a young colleague in your field, who is just burning to meet the famous Professor Picard.

If French trains do not belie their reputation, we won't be far behind this very letter.

*Yours truly,
Arthur Conan Doyle*

I set aside the letter just as footsteps echoed down the corridor. Charlus knocked on the half-opened door of my office, breathless from having run in spite of the heat:

"They're here, monsieur le professeur. But it's incredible!"

He stepped aside to let Doyle come in. The man was ever the same, stiff with his military bearing of old, yet unageing in spite of the small, round eyeglasses he wore. When I got up, I kept in mind his distaste for the full Gallic hug and simply proffered a hand. He shook it warmly and then used it to pull me into the corridor outside.

"As I feared, Frédéric, my young friend has fallen in thrall to your collection. Please blame his scientific instincts for his lack of manners; I'm sure you will find it in yourself to forgive him."

Just opposite my office, I keep in a glass showcase one of the jewels of our collection: a skeleton, nearly whole, found in a Mousterian cave near Bruniquel. The man in front, half kneeling to examine the sutures of the pelvic girdle, turned as he heard us. I couldn't help but recoil slightly.

He was tall, quite a bit taller than Doyle or myself, who are hardly pygmies. An ample beard of the deepest black climbed all the way up to his eyebrows, which were almost as bushy. The head was nearly large enough to reduce the outsized ears to normal proportions, though they still seemed apt to flap in the slightest breeze. Their coloration betrayed a sanguine disposition, given to sudden violence.

Challenger's pale gaze dissected me with the same sharpness it had no doubt used on the unfortunate skeleton.

A skeleton to which he bore the most striking resemblance!

Well, that explained the amazement of old Charlus. It was as if a distant relative of the showcase's occupant had suddenly decided to visit him. The same cranial shape, the same powerful back that might have been a wrestler's, the same simian stance not unlike that of a gorilla on the verge of a headlong charge. For a palaeontologist, the points of similarity were glaringly obvious.

"A remarkable specimen," the young man proclaimed in French with a booming voice. "But I must protest: the reconstruction of the innominate bones, however adept, is..."

"Frédéric," Doyle cut him off pitilessly, "may I introduce young Challenger, who's just back from Mongolia with some fascinating theories about the Kalmuks? George, this is Professor Picard, who has kindly invited us to visit his museum."

"Mongolia, *n'est-ce pas?* You'll have to tell me all about it when we have the time," I said, shaking his hand. The strength of his grip made me wince slightly.

"But still, those innominate bones..." he replied, but Doyle obviously knew how to handle him.

"Later, George," he cut him off again. "I believe time is of the essence and I look forward to hearing what Professor Picard has to tell us."

Rather than have them sit in the hothouse my office had become, I went down with them to the basement laboratory, through the trapdoor just beneath the blue whale skeleton.

Doyle sat down. Challenger rejected the armchair I was offering with a shake of the head, and he went off to gaze at an allosaurus tooth mounted on the far wall. I looked at him, pursing my lips. Not yet 30, and he already showed all the signs of our avocation! He could have given pointers to colleagues ten times more experienced when it came to bad manners. No matter! It was Doyle, and Doyle alone, I needed, even if I deplored the absence of our *mutual friend*, as he called him. The man's prodigious powers of observation and deduction would have come in most useful.

"It's about a murder," I announced. "A Palaeolithic murder..."

Challenger jumped perceptibly, but did not look around. Doyle smiled encouragingly at me, "Your assistant, if I recall your initial letter..."

"Michel Desnoyer. In his 30s. He'd studied with Cuvier in Paris and been with Basserman in Amazonia during the second expedition, in '88. A bit too imaginative for my taste, but he had impeccable references – and manners!" The latter was meant for the back of my young colleague, who no more flinched than a rhinoceros bitten by a flea. "He was killed about three weeks ago, in the middle of the night, on the other side of the Garonne, near the Hôtel-Dieu."

"An affair of the heart?"

"I doubt it. He was more interested in flowers than women. He had a mistress, I suppose, but..."

"What kind of flowers?" Challenger asked, turning without warning.

I confess I was needled by the question, but we had come in one stroke to the heart of the matter. Somehow, this extraordinary man had divined it.

"Orchids. More specifically the local varieties. Which brings us to the first mystery associated with this murder."

"Orchids in Toulouse. Who would have thought it?" muttered Doyle. "I did see a poster outside the train station, announcing an opera recital by the Night Orchid herself, but I didn't expect to encounter her floral equivalent here in Toulouse!"

"Michel would have proven you wrong. He had discovered several spots as they are called, isolated pockets where local conditions allow them to flourish. When he died, he was holding in his fist a deep red bloom of the *Oncidium Macranthum* variety. Picked less than an hour earlier."

Challenger scowled, his eyebrows seeming to grow even thicker, and I guessed, from the blood beating in his temples, that he was struggling hard to remain composed. I endured his glare for a moment before adding:

"This is not the only impossibility, my dear colleague. I know full well that the *Macranthum* variety is to be found only on the most remote high plateaus of the globe. And, to the best of my knowledge, no European collector has ever been able to grow them in a greenhouse. However, the case gets curioser and curioser:

"Michel was killed by a singular weapon. A claw, whose broken end we found deep in his vitals. Strange enough – murders are not rare, around here, but they're mostly

of the knifing or shooting kind. Stranger yet is what I recovered during the autopsy. Behold, the murder weapon!"

I took out from an inner vest pocket the object which I'd kept there since Michel's death and I held it out to Doyle. But it was Challenger who grabbed it with his broad hand bristling with coarse dark hairs.

He raised it to the light, muttering under his breath. It was a curved claw, coal-black and as long as my palm. The barbs jutting out from its sides had torn Michel's flesh, causing grievous damage. The right-hand edge bore a notch where the claw had wedged itself between two vertebrae.

"This," Challenger pronounced with due emphasis, "passes all that can be imagined in the way of a bad joke. Come, Doyle, we have already wasted too much time coming here! As for you, *Monsieur*, if you thought, that we would let ourselves be fooled, even for an instant, by the most ridiculous fake I ever..."

"A moment, if you please!" I held back Doyle, who was on the verge, for once, of losing his British *sang-froid*. "*Monsieur* Challenger, I can understand your reaction up to a point, even if I cannot excuse it. But I must ask you to grant me the common courtesy of letting me finish my story. Please believe I am thoroughly puzzled by this affair and that it is in no way a deliberate attempt on my part to garner public notice. My present notoriety is quite sufficient!"

Having thus reminded him of our respective positions, as I am an authority in my field, which is also his own, I held out my hand for the claw. Clearly reluctant to do so, Challenger nevertheless returned it.

"Please excuse my show of temper," he said with difficulty, "but I am unable to believe this is anything but a joke whose intent escapes me, a hoax such as the French like to play."

"A man is dead, George," Doyle reproved him, taking the murder weapon. "Let us see this..." He turned over the claw between his fingers. "A fascinating item, at any rate. Certainly primitive, but no less efficacious. I have already seen such things in the British Museum, used as spearheads."

He leaned back into the armchair and steepled his fingers under his chin.

"Our mutual friend would easily deduce that this object points to a very specific category of suspects: palaeontologists, or those who have ready access to the museum it was stolen from. The victim being from the same circles is hardly surprising... Professional jealousy?"

"You are on the wrong track, my dear Doyle. *Monsieur* Challenger guessed right away that this is unlike anything in our experience. What bird do you think this claw came from?"

"I wouldn't know."

Challenger's smouldering look deterred me from pursuing that line of reasoning. I sighed, recovered the fatal claw, and rose.

"Then let us go and visit the scene of the crime!"

More than a simple reprieve after the heat, summer evenings in Toulouse boast a charm of their own. The waning light lends a unique hue to the red bricks it caresses. Near the river blows a soothing breeze and the Garonne's banks entice the day's last strollers. I rejoiced in pointing out to my visitors the graceful nudes of the Beaux-Arts academy's marble facade, as well as the numerous private mansions along the cobblestoned avenues.

But Doyle proved uninterested in architecture and Challenger was hurrying as if to keep an appointment with Old Nick himself. The young beauties who brushed by with their parasols did not succeed in distracting him. When we reached the Pont Neuf, I resolved to hail a cab. It dropped us behind the Hôtel-Dieu, at one end of a narrow and winding street that opened directly onto the river's bank.

The street was lined with abandoned houses, their windows barred with thick wooden planks. Since the last epidemic, no one felt like living this close to the hospital. My fellow citizens still remembered the days when the dead went downstream aboard requisitioned barges to be burned far from the city, atop immense pyres. And we were right by one of the loading docks used for that gruesome work.

"Desnoyer was found in a courtyard by the water," I said as we went through a porchway. "This very one!"

When she heard these words from me, a young woman whose face was hidden by a mourning veil turned around, uttering a stifled cry. My companions halted and Doyle took off his hat, bowing formally.

Where the body had lain on a bed of rough cobblestones, a hand had set down a wreath of freshly-cut flowers, tied with a speckled band of black velvet. It was no doubt the young woman's own shapely hand which had tended to this forlorn task before our arrival on the scene.

"You were a friend of his, I presume?" I said, after presenting my companions and myself.

"No, *monsieur le professeur*!" The stranger drew herself up proudly. "I am Irène Ader-Desnoyer. I was... I am his wife."

She raised her veil. Her magnificent green eyes, lined with long, fluttering lashes, glistened with tears. Her brow and her cheeks still bore a touch of the pallor caused by an unexpected shock. The sorrow she bore with such dignity did not detract from her beauty; on the contrary, it lent her a unique charm. I could well understand how she had entranced my ill-fated collaborator. But why had he kept her existence a secret?

"Michel often spoke of you," she whispered, as if in response to my thoughts. "He wanted to keep our marriage a secret as long as his situation was not secure. I can reveal all now: I am a *denizen of the stage*, a mere artist who did not fit in the scientific world he was a part of!"

"I assume you're a singer, *madame*?" Doyle asked. "I can see the first bars of a musical score in your bag, but your hands exhibit none of the common deformities of musicians. In England, I assure you that the singing profession is a perfectly respectable one."

"The local public is less forgiving, sir... And no favour is shown to those men who marry women like me. If Michel had been content with a mistress, a *kept woman*, he could have shown me off in public, as a trophy of sorts. He chose to marry me in secret. He loved me, I know it."

"We will avenge him," I said, nodding. "My friends here came to help me solve the mystery of his death. If you will allow it, we will explore this place to look for clues."

"You will find nothing! The monster who did this is already back in his lair, where no one will dare to follow."

"So you know who it was," Doyle said. "I suppose..."

He was interrupted by Challenger's exclamation. The professor had set a knee on the ground to get a closer look at the wreath lying on the cobblestones. He pulled out a flower of the deepest red, streaked with purple, and pointed it at the young widow. "This, my lady," he said, brandishing the flower like a sword, oblivious to the grotesque pose he was striking, "deserves an explanation. *Oncidium*, the giant species from the high Amazonian plateaus. *What in the Devil's name is going on here?*"

I do not know if it was the profanity or the sudden reminder of her loss, but the young woman suddenly started sobbing. Doyle, ever the English gentleman, looked away bashfully.

"We are very sorry," I said, trying to soothe her. "Our friend is a bit high-strung."

"No," she said, choking. "He's right! I haven't said a word to anybody. I was scared of being laughed at. Only my brother Clément knows. He's a scientist, but he is not a sceptic, like so many."

"Please believe, my dear child..."

She stopped me with a single resolute gesture, drawing from her sleeve a linen kerchief to dry her tears.

"Promise that you will listen to me and I'll tell you everything I know. Even if my story seems quite mad, I will swear on what I hold most sacred that it is as true as the Gospel."

Without releasing the orchid, Challenger bowed before the young woman and answered, more respectful than I had ever expected to see him:

"Please forgive my deplorable manners, *madame*. I can assure you that your account will have no listener more devoted than myself."

She thanked him with a nod. Behind her, the cupola of the Hôtel-Dieu blushed rosily in the sunset, not unlike an upturned woman's breast naked to the sky. On the other side of the Garonne, Saint-Sernin erected a phallic churchtower above the surrounding roofs. The town of Toulouse is a true hermaphrodite, a proud and secret city, entrusted every evening with its share of mysteries to be scattered by the first rays of sunrise.

A flock of sparrows streaked by, and I could hear in their songs the first intimations of summer's end.

"Michel was mad about orchids," the young woman began. "When our liaison began, when I knew I'd found the man I'd been waiting for all my life, I already feared that his passion for those confounded flowers would stand between us. He spent most of his free time hunting for them and I finally resolved to come along in order to see

more of him. The poor man even believed I'd grown to share his passion.

"We're not rich, and it was unthinkable that Michel would buy from rare-flower merchants the expensive blooms he coveted. He had to make do with the common varieties that grow in and around Toulouse, in secret spots known only to connoisseurs. However, he came home one day in an extraordinary state, holding tenderly a flower such as I had never seen before.

"Look, look!" he said. "An exotic from a hothouse that has managed to survive in our latitudes! I've discovered an old abandoned house above the old sandstone quarries. It's filled with the most unlikely plants. I wonder what collector used to live there... I'll have to ask around!"

"I didn't know it then, but this flower was to seal his fate. The place he had discovered" – she pointed to the crumbling walls of the building which occupied one side of the courtyard, by the water – "had an amazing history. It was built over one of the oldest underground sandstone quarries. Tunnels dug as far back as the Middle Ages led to its cellar. Or to this very courtyard."

We looked where she was looking. A shadow-filled opening, half hidden by wild grass, yawned by the farthest wall. I caught sight of a length of rope tied to a rusty ring set in the corner stone.

"It is said the Cathars hid out in the caves underneath Toulouse after the fall of Montségur and that they dug all the way to Hell. It is said Fermat, the mathematician, left in these tunnels secrets of geometry bound up with the nature of God. He lived here, you know... But people say so many things!"

I smiled in spite of myself. "Michel was too reasonable to swallow such ridiculous tales."

"Michel is dead, *monsieur le professeur*. Killed by the curse of this awful place. People like you, who dig into the layers of the past, should be scared of unearthing the deepest myths of mankind. This is the century of Steam and Electricity: some things should remain buried. One day, the same curse will strike archaeologists who dare to disturb even the millennia-old sleep of the mummies!"

"I tell you this, because I have seen, with my own eyes, things nobody would credit. There, in the gallery Michel convinced me to explore with him."

She stopped to search our faces for signs of doubt. I believe that any expression of scepticism on our part would have caused her to break off her story once and for all. But Challenger nodded gravely:

"I have just returned from Mongolia, *madame*, and the natives of those lands share your views on all points. I learned not to dismiss their warnings."

"Michel heeded them not, alas! In the course of his explorations, he delved farther and farther, armed with a paraffin lamp and a mere walking stick. One day, I saw him come back in a state of utter exaltation, with an armful of orchids. He had discovered an *unimaginable place* which he urgently wanted me to see.

"I followed him, fool that I was. We had hardly entered the darkness when a bloodcurdling roar echoed before us. It was as if all the night's terrors had come together into

one lone cry. Then, there was another, closer yet. Michel dropped our only lamp, which shattered upon impact. He yelled for me to go back outside and I ran without looking to see if he was following me."

She buried her face in her hands. Doyle looked sceptical, which did not surprise me greatly. On the other hand, Challenger appeared to be prodigiously interested. His gaze wandered from the young woman to the entrance of the underground world, as if he expected an army of ghosts to issue from the pit at any moment.

"What can I tell of the horror of the following minutes?" Irène whispered. "I ran in the darkness and I got lost. The screams behind me grew dimmer, but the dark still clung to me like a spider's web. My arms before me, I walked onward, unable to spot the precious light of the entry well."

"A miracle saved me then. A light appeared in the darkness, a glowing dot floating in mid-air, shining with a distant radiance. I followed it, unable to catch up to it, but it led me to another exit by the riverbank. Once there, it vanished from my sight. But I do not doubt that I was guided by a kindly spirit out of that hellish place!"

"I must disagree with you there," Doyle said. "Your spirit was probably a will-o'-the-wisp, due to the presence of flammable gases. It merely followed a draft toward the nearest exit. A common enough occurrence in old mines. To paraphrase an old friend: only accept the improbable when you have eliminated everything else!"

"Not that this explanation detracts from your courage in the least," he hastened to add. "And what did Michel have to say of your adventure?"

"I never saw him again," she answered with a sob. "I waited for hours by the entry well, before going home, beset by worry, as you can imagine. A police constable came later with the terrible news, but I think I already feared the worst, at the bottom of my heart."

"And you didn't see anything?" Doyle persisted. "The slightest detail could put us on the trail..."

"Only that horrible cry, but it was enough to convince me." She turned to me, her voice rising. "My husband's killer is a beast more terrible than all the wild animals of your museum, *monsieur le professeur*. I've sworn to hunt it down without mercy. I may be only a woman, but I will not let it go on and kill again."

"An admirable sentiment!" Challenger said, without a hint of irony. "Let me assure you, *madame*, of my sympathy, and offer my wholehearted support."

His rough manner had mellowed noticeably, but I suspected it was no more than a lull. Through the beard extending over two thirds of his face, I could see his mouth quirking doubtfully, while his penetrating gaze ranged over the entire courtyard, looking for the answer to a question he alone had asked.

"May I see again the item you showed us, Professor?" he said suddenly, putting out his hand. "I'm almost inclined to regret my earlier scepticism. I have the glimmers of an idea or two... The whole affair is impossible, of course, but an Englishman starts off the day by believing six impossible things before breakfast."

I gave him the claw, a bit surprised by his turnaround.

He raised it in the air, bathing it in the last of the light. His rough-hewn hands seemed strangely out of place, too primitive to stand in front of the ochre rooftops, seamed with the delicate pink of sun-splashed bricks.

"We will hunt with you, *madame*, if you let us," Challenger announced with a sonorous voice. "*Professeur*, I'm sorry I lost my temper. I have made too many enemies among my colleagues and my suspicions are easily aroused. My theories are misunderstood by those fools, but this time they will be shown up once and for all..."

"Doyle, and you, Picard," he added abruptly, "do you have anything suited to big-game hunting? I fear I left my guns in London."

Doyle shook his head, and I did likewise. In a few minutes, this amazing young man had gained such a hold over us that I found myself ready to let him take charge of the next phase of operations.

"A pity! We will have to be content with a simple scouting expedition, when night falls. Yet, this case must be brought to a quick resolution, for I feel that worse may yet be to come."

"I must sing tonight," the young woman announced after a pause. "It's the next-to-last performance of the Night Orchid and I'm in the first rank of the choristers. If I leave, I risk being let go. Wait for me by the stage exit, after the show. My brother will be there too."

"Are you really sure?" I protested. "The danger..."

"Michel thought I deserved the best he could offer, *monsieur le professeur*. I will not betray his trust in me."

She lowered her veil and bent to rearrange the wreath at her feet. It was clearly time to leave her alone. When we stood again on the Pont-Neuf, whose brick and stone arches spanned a river reduced to a trickle by the drought, I tried to look for the house we'd found among the jumble of roofs around the Hôtel-Dieu. But I could not find it, as if our meeting place already belonged to a bygone era.

"The sound is superb," Doyle remarked as we left the opera house amid the throng of music-lovers. "And the Orchid is truly divine. What a voice!"

"I don't know," I said. "That way she has of lingering on the high C far longer than what Bellini asked for shows a certain impudence. Like a bird of prey defying its rivals when it fights for a mate."

"You have too much imagination, Professor," Challenger sniffed. "But the comparison is apt nonetheless."

Capitole Square was aglow with the radiance of the gaslights whose yellowish haloes were reflected in the mirrors of the cafés. The bustling arcades filled to overflowing by evening strollers did not surprise an old Toulouse hand like me, but they seemed to dismay Challenger. He had refused to put on evening wear in the teeth of Doyle's pleas – Doyle himself was in uniform. Challenger and I made for an astonishing contrast, I with walking stick in hand, moving with the unhurried pace appropriate to my age and rank in society, while he forged ahead like a young bull, trying to batter his way through a mass of bodies that refused to yield. In my city, rhythm is key. Walking among Toulouse strollers is a sub-

tle art I know well. But how was I to teach the finer points of dawdling to an Englishman just back from remotest Mongolia?

The stage exit opened onto a small square occupied by a public park, well-known for its lovers and pickpockets. Coming closer to the door, which was defended by a watchman in uniform, I noticed a man looking up at the moon, hands locked behind his back. A thick moustache adorned his face as if to compensate for a receding hairline. When we approached, he seemed to awake as if from a dream.

"Professor Picard?" he inquired tentatively. "I'm Clément, Irène's brother. I've come to help, if you let me."

"We will be happy to, sir," I answered, bowing. "Your presence is more than welcome. Here are my friends, Doyle and Challenger. We are at your service."

"Much obliged. Irène should be out soon! To tell you the truth" – his voice lowered so much that we strained to hear his whispers – "I am worried about her. I tried to change her mind about coming, but she doesn't listen to me even though I'm the eldest."

"Opera is a harsh taskmistress," Doyle pronounced. "She has the *tempérament artistique*, as you French say. But don't worry, we will have no trouble keeping her out of harm's way."

A rising hubbub behind the door preceded the exit of the first performers. Traditionally, the divas come out last, long after the crowd of extras and lower-ranking musicians. I knew the Night Orchid would still be holding court in her dressing room filled with flowers and admirers. If circumstances had been different, I might have stopped by to pay her homage, even though I had not been entirely seduced by her rendition. Scientific accuracy be damned, a lie to a woman as beautiful as the Orchid didn't count.

"Here comes my sister," Clément warned us. "Not a word about my worries, please, she'd have a laughing fit!"

We stepped aside to let a gaggle of young debutantes file out, all aflutter over their first meeting with a diva. Irène rushed out next, a cape hanging from her shoulders and the remnants of stage paint like clouds on her brow. She greeted us with a quick nod – though I noticed with displeasure that she reserved a coquettish pout for Challenger – and seized her brother by the arm. She led us toward the Garonne along Pargaminière street. The crowd of strollers cleared quickly and we were alone by the time we reached the Saint-Pierre bridge. Night reigned unchallenged over the opposite bank, a hostile territory of impenetrable shadows.

"We're unarmed," I warned her while trying to keep up with her. "We won't run any unnecessary risks."

"Well, not I," she said, surprising us by taking a twin-barrelled Webley from under her cape, the metal gleaming in the glow of the gaslights. "Please stop taking me for a defenceless creature, Professor. This is the 19th century!"

"Irène, you promised me you would be reasonable," her brother chided. "What must these gentlemen be thinking?"

A passing coach picked up speed when the coachman

caught sight of the weapon, the clattering wheels louder than the horse's clip-clop over the cobblestones. Challenger sniffed disdainfully and put out his hand.

"What sort of ammunition?"

"I'm loaded for boar. Our gunshops don't carry anything bigger. There are no tigers in the vicinity."

"We may scare the beast, but we won't even wing it, except by good fortune. Give me that!"

He grabbed the gun rather roughly, ignoring Irène's startled cry. Standing tall on his powerful legs, his beard already disarranged, he trained it on the Moon in one single motion.

"Look!" he shouted with a curse. "And tell me I'm not mad!"

We looked up. Across the silvery orb lighting the sky like a lantern, glided the shape of a monstrous bird, its wings razor-sharp. An endless beak seemed to be just an extension of the thin neck, the hide mottled and soot-coloured. A protruding yellow eye cast an evil glance in our direction. An aura of malevolent strength radiated from the beast, reinforced by the dents of the cranium left over from uncountable battles to the death. Gleaming darkly, sinister claws dangled from the out-thrust legs. One was broken.

The pterodactyl, for it was now impossible to call it otherwise, dived toward the maze of red roofs on the far side of the Garonne. Challenger almost let off a shot, but he was too good a hunter to overestimate his chances of hitting the mark from so far off. Instead of which, he started to run, gun in hand. Stunned, we watched him race away, heading for the first houses.

A deep, long-contained, elephant-like trumpeting rose from his mighty chest, when he shouldered the gun in mid-stride and fired, just as the monster was disappearing from our sight.

The pterodactyl bucked in mid-air. A cry of defiance, the most terrifying it was ever given me to hear, tore through the dark. It climbed ever higher and then clung to a perfect note, as pure as the lament of a crystal shattering. Doyle was the first to react:

"In the Queen's name, Picard, we must destroy this monster!"

"Challenger must have scored a hit," I said. "But I fear its hide is just too thick for our bullets."

My young colleague was striding back toward us, swinging the Webley at the end of one long arm. He shook his head.

"You're right, Professor, it was no more than a love pat for such a beast. It will be back."

Doyle shook his head sombrely.

"Why should it come back? If we only knew what drew it out of its lair tonight, we could set a trap for it, but –"

"I think I know," Irène said quietly. "It came out to listen to the Orchid."

Her brother stared at her with an incredulous expression that might have been comical in other surroundings. Once more, Challenger surprised us:

"I bow before your superior ear, my lady. I wouldn't swear the cry of this fowl from Hades was a high C, but if you say so, I can well believe it."

Doyle nodded doubtfully:

"How can you be so certain?"

"Elementary, my dear Doyle. I've simply noticed that the date of poor Michel's death followed right on the heels of the first recital of the Night Orchid. Remember the posters we saw outside the station? And then I observed the pterodactyl was coming from the Capitole's direction when it overflew us. Yet, such a nocturnal beast should flee the lights of the city. Therefore, it must have had a powerful reason to be over there. And there was its cry... Isn't it passing strange, my friends, that the composers of today's operettas are merely imitating the love calls of extinct species?

"Did I say extinct?" His voice trailed as the true scope of our discovery became clear to us. When he turned back to me, we shared in the same excitement. "You were already famous, Professor Picard, but your present repute will be as nothing soon. Your Museum will turn back visitors when we hang the corpse of our monstrous ancestor from its rafters. And I fully expect to be the one to bring it down!"

"Speaking of which," I said, trying to keep a cool head in trying circumstances, "we French have a saying that warns against selling the hide of a bear you haven't killed yet. We cannot track it underground: it would flee the light and we would be too exposed in the dark. As for bringing it down in mid-flight... We don't have the appropriate weapon and I can't help you get any. I only hunt butterflies."

"We know where it's hiding and we know how to make it come out," he interrupted me with his usual rudeness. "Just give me a chance to find something more than this popgun and load it for elephant. I will camp out on your opera house's roof till it shows up. One shot, just give me one clear shot at it!"

"Alas, monsieur," Irène said, "the last recital of the Orchid is tomorrow. The diva has promised to hold her high C until her breath fails. That will be our last chance to avenge my husband, I fear."

Challenger seemed thunderstruck. He gazed at the Webley, which seemed no more than a toy in his powerful fist and he muttered:

"Tomorrow? All is lost! Unless... we ambush it in mid-air, face to face... A balloon! Can we get one by tomorrow, Professor? Here, in Pilâtre de Rozier's hometown, there is surely..."

I was shaking my head commiseratingly. When it comes to the sport of kings, the English are given to bouts of temporary insanity. It's no use reasoning with them, so I turned to Irène Ader.

"I'm afraid, my dear lady..."

"No!" she cried out. "There is a solution. Clément, I beg you, speak! The secret is moot, now that the War Ministry knows about your invention. Can't you see this is the ideal occasion?"

I can still see us in that instant, stopped in the middle of the bridge under which the Garonne stretched its silver curls in the moonlight. Doyle stood back, looking dubious. Irène, carried away by her artistic and womanly impulsiveness, had fallen to her brother's feet to implore

I knew not what favour. And Challenger, his gaze on the roofs of the opposite bank, was surely pondering the lost worlds hidden beyond the surface of things, in remote jungles or in the labyrinths excavated by men.

"Speak, oh, speak!" Irène exclaimed. "These men are our friends. If you won't do it for me, please do it for Michel..."

This last adjuration overcame the engineer's reservations. He helped her up tenderly and held her at arm's length. A smile bloomed in the thick moustache's shadow.

"Irène is right. To fight such a monster, all good men must come together. I will ask for your solemn vow, gentlemen, that you will not breathe a word of what you will discover at my place before the French War Ministry makes it public."

Doyle automatically straightened his uniform's lapels before swearing solemnly, with the rest of us chorusing dutifully.

"Let's meet tomorrow morning at my home," Ader said. "If you still wish to fight this evil bird in the air, I have something that could help you."

We parted on Ader's enigmatic promise, heading for the gaslit heart of the city. I could still hear the high-pitched lament of the pterodactyl and I suspect my companions were also haunted by its keening. None of us slept soundly that night.

A rented trap took us out of Toulouse, toward Muret. Ader lived in a farm on the heights, behind a tall row of elms. Rows of grapevines criss-crossed the hillsides, already heavy with purplish grape bunches. The grape harvest promised to be a memorable one.

Ader waited for us in a barn away from the garden. The large wooden doors were locked and we had to slip inside through a narrow backdoor. Shafts of golden light came through the roof and threw tawny shadows over the wooden troughs and baskets hanging by their leather handles. In one corner, glass bottles were stacked horizontally behind a low wall of hay bales. In the middle of the packed earth floor, a gigantic vampire bat peered out of a cloud of dust motes.

I must confess I was taken aback. The shape of the mechanical animal – that, at least, was obvious – loomed menacingly in the half-light. Six metres in length, with a wingspan just under 15 metres, its front flaunted a conical protrusion crowned with a bamboo propeller, just like the ones spinning from the ceiling of Indian palaces to refresh the local maharajahs. Black silk covered the wings' wood frame. The result looked like something out of a palaeontologist's nightmares.

Doyle, on the other hand, was instantly won over. He walked around the giant bat, an admiring cast to his features, and he bent to look over the cockpit carved inside the animal's spine, with its handful of primitive instruments. Softly but firmly, Ader pulled him back:

"Allow me to keep my little secrets. This is the *Éole*. I will use it to prove to the Académie's scientists that it is indeed feasible to fly with a heavier-than-air craft!"

"Feh," Challenger sniffed. "Is this the chiropter you're hoping to use to fight the pterodactyl on its own ground,

so to speak?"

"Are you an engineer, sir?"

"I am an Englishman," he replied as if that were enough.

"The *Éole* has a 20-horsepower motor; the wings are patterned after those of the bat," Ader explained swiftly. "Victor Hugo said it best when he spoke of craft built using the power of number and imagination. With it, I will throw the sceptics into confusion, even the English. But that's neither here nor there. We must take the *Éole* to Toulouse in a covered wagon and find a take-off location sufficiently high up to let us get close to the pterodactyl. I'll fly, you shoot."

"The museum's roof is nearly flat," I said, "and it can be reached through the great skylight of the main gallery. There's a winch we can use. But I fear..." I racked my brains to find a polite way of putting it. "But I'm afraid my worthy colleague's *stature* will result in an excessive load for your craft. The two of you together will never leave the ground!"

Silence filled the barn. Ader was too good an engineer not to recognize I was right.

"Therefore, you've got until tonight to teach me how to handle it," Challenger pronounced. "I will not turn back when we're so close to success."

Doyle exclaimed: "Spoken like a genuine hothead, George! Your courage is beyond doubt... but this is sheer madness. Please think for a minute that –"

"Pffft!" Challenger was striding back and forth in the barn, combing his heavy beard with his fingers. "The field outside is perfectly suited for a test flight. If, and I insist, if that contraption takes off, it will carry me aloft tonight. Let's fill the machine's tank and let's go!"

He stepped over the row of hay bales in front of the stacked bottles. Ader yelled out:

"Wait, man! That's my private stock of marc brandy. It would blow the *Éole* to smithereens if you tried to use it as a fuel."

Challenger stopped. His huge shape bending over the flasks resembled that of an angry God ready to smite its unfortunate creations.

"There's enough in there to leave a Horse-Guards regiment reeling," he said, glancing admiringly at Ader. "Ah, the French..."

"One of my neighbours has a still and sets aside part of his production for me. I've stored everything here. I'm the only one who can get in." The engineer headed for the main door, which he opened with a key. "Let's get the *Éole* outside. The alcohol store for the motor is outside, under an awning."

When we headed back to Toulouse, in the waning afternoon, we had with us a wagon such as the produce-sellers use.

The uncanny shape of the *Éole* was hidden beneath a tarpaulin, the wings folded and the propeller disassembled. We followed the towpath of the canal into town and reached the museum just as the sun was setting behind the avenue's private mansions. Charlus had already left, but I had no trouble finding him in the Saint-Michel alehouse, vast and noisy. For a gold

napoleon, he helped us to haul the machine up on the roof, without asking a single question. Years spent dusting the skeletons of the Palaeontological collection had slowly eroded his sense of curiosity.

"The worst is over," I said, wiping my forehead while my companions were putting the propeller back in its place. "Thank God! I'm too old to roam the roofs like a chimney sweep, even if the view is superb..."

Challenger performed a slow scan of the skyline, his hand shading his eyes.

"A sea of red tiles," he stated, "and not a lighthouse to show me the way. It would be easier to find my way in a jungle."

"The Capitole is over there. Bear right for the Saint-Sernin churchtower and you'll end up over it without fail. The pterodactyl will be coming from over there." I pointed to the Hôtel-Dieu's dome. "If you time it well, you can intercept it over the river."

"As long as I know when to take off..."

"I own an excellent pair of German binoculars."

"The hide of this damned bird is too dark; it will merge with the night sky. Binoculars would be useless. No, we'll have to trust to Lady Luck, and she's a fickle mistress, Professor."

Before climbing down, we stretched a sheet over the *Éole*. With its bat wings now extended and sheathed in white, it looked like a fallen angel. The setting sun saved its last rays for our ill-assorted group while, 15 metres below, the massing crowd of aficionados prepared to hear the last recital of the Night Orchid.

Irène met us in the Café des Arts, on Capitole Square. Ader had advised Challenger not to weigh himself down with a heavy meal before his flight, though he authorized, grudgingly, a single glass of Armagnac. As a consequence, my young colleague was simmering, torn between anticipation of the coming hunt and the hunger gnawing his huge carcass. The young woman's arrival restored his good cheer, but not for long:

"The recital is delayed," Irène announced, sitting down by her brother. "The Orchid is having one of her whims. The public doesn't know it yet, but it's going to have to wait at least an hour to hear its diva."

"The Devil take her!" Challenger exclaimed. "I'd been hoping she would launch into her high C around the same time as yesterday... Our appointment tonight is in jeopardy."

"If the opera house was equipped with my theatrophone, we could have followed the entire concert from the museum's roof with farspeakers," Ader sighed. "This is madness: the whole plan relies on nothing but improvisation through and through!"

I was inclined to agree. Once more, however, it was Irène who lifted our flagging spirits.

"Do you know how to read a musical score, monsieur le professeur?" she asked me, smiling. "If I gave you the full score for tonight's recital, would you be able to follow it, in time, till the moment of the high C?"

I was sorely tempted to say yes, if only not to sadden the magnificent eyes set upon my face. But I had to

shake my head.

"In that case, I will have to join you on the roof during the intermission," Irène said, her tone brooking no disagreement. "I will arrange it with the leader of the chorus."

"I'll drink to that," Challenger said.

And he ordered a full flask of Armagnac from the waiter. For the road!

We took up again our observation post above the skylight. As the last of the twilight faded, the museum grew crowded with ghosts of a distant past. The great reptiles who walked the Earth long before our own glory days shifted their silhouettes along the plaster walls. Only a little imagination was needed to transform an incomplete skeleton into a crouching predator. As palaeontologists, we are dreamers by necessity. Our minds are trained to recreate a whole unknown fauna from a few traces left in clay, a tooth or a bone splinter. The noise rising from the streets of Toulouse waned. I sneaked a look at my pocket watch: had the show begun? Challenger, sitting in the *Éole*'s cockpit, was checking the Webley for the tenth time. His head and its mass of hair alone emerged from the aircraft's bulk. The wings had been unfolded and the alcohol motor was turning over slowly in expectation of the moment of take-off. The air was still. Doyle was sweeping the horizon with the binoculars, ranging up and down the Garonne's banks. We were all silent, lost in thought.

"Here's my sister," Ader said suddenly, leaning over the parapet.

He helped her to climb the ladder, depriving me of that very same pleasure, and relieved her of the thick score she was carrying.

"Prepare yourselves," she said when she reached the roof. "There's only a few dozen bars left before the Orchid's solo. I'll give you the sign."

Ader revved up his motor, and spun the propeller to check its readiness.

"Don't forget to adjust the airfoils," he muttered. "And God keep you!"

Irène gestured like a maestro. The moment was nigh. Doyle helped the engineer to set out the planks that would let the craft plunge into the void on outstretched wings. Despite the afternoon's demonstration, I still had a hard time believing in such a miracle: a man – an Englishman – was going to slip the bonds of gravity to fight a monster on its own ground. Surely, such whimsy was fit only for the story-telling of a Jules Verne.

"Engage!" Ader shouted.

The propeller started to turn haltingly. An idea came to me suddenly.

"Take a lozenge," I said to Challenger, holding out the circular box that I took everywhere. "It may help you fight the effects of altitude."

A muffled grumbling rose from the cockpit while the man's thick fingers closed on my liquorice provision. Ader then motioned me aside.

"The *Éole* will take off as soon as I pull away the wedges. We'll track it with the binoculars."

"Sixteen bars," Irène warned. "Twelve... Eight... Here's the beginning of the aria!"

We strained to listen, in vain. The Capitole was much too far off. Yet, an imperceptible vibration, an echo of the merest breath, seemed to fill the night air with its call.

"I can see something," Doyle said, straddling the parapet. "Take off now!"

Ader spun the propeller with all his might. The alcohol motor shuddered, releasing plumes of white smoke. We braced ourselves against the machine to push it up the narrow plankway leading to the edge of the building – which is precisely when the motor started to misfire.

Powerless, we could only try to hold back the *Éole*. The propeller's jolts elicited a stream of curses from Challenger, who was struggling to get clear from the narrow cockpit. Irène had dropped her score and was staring at her brother, a desperate appeal in her eyes, while the slender shadow of the pterodactyl slipped above the river.

"No, I will not!" stormed Challenger, at last able to move freely. "Step back!"

His hand plunged into his pocket. Horror-struck, we saw him take out the bottle of Armagnac which he emptied whole into the tank. Its effect made itself felt almost instantly.

The motor raced. The propeller whined and we felt the *Éole* snatch itself out of our hands. The mad Englishman had understood how to get a French motor's attention! With outspread wings, the chiropter rushed up the planks and leaped over the roof edge before arcing into the sky like a meteor. We rushed to follow its flight. Handicapped by his weight, Challenger was forced to fly at roof level along Saint-Michel avenue. But the pterodactyl had too great a headstart. We could see that it would take a miracle to catch it.

Irène Ader surely understood as much. Without soliciting our approval, displaying the same quiet courage we had already been given to admire, she undid the scarf around her neck and breathed deeply.

The first notes of Bellini's aria surged into the night, pure as tears. Irène sang her love for a husband gone too soon, with unmatched feeling, doubling and trebling the song's power. Her voice gained in confidence and she attacked the crescendo leading up to the high C.

"What a woman," Doyle couldn't help whispering. "Even our mutual friend, however little he prizes the fair sex, would fall under her spell..."

"The pterodactyl too," I replied. "Look, it's coming toward us!"

Even with Irène Ader's unexpected help, the pterodactyl might have escaped us if the *Éole*'s motor hadn't started to throw off sparks. The Armagnac had surged into the tubing and set off a series of explosions, kicking the aircraft forward. Thus it was that we saw Challenger surge over the river in the midst of a veritable fireball, like a modern-day Saint George astride a dragon. We distinctly heard his cry of victory when he positioned the airfoils to charge straight for the monster.

The beast wasted no time in beating back toward its lair. Uncaring for his own safety, Challenger followed, the Webley outstretched before him like a lance. I guessed

he was trying to hit the pterodactyl's enormous eye. The *Éole* was behaving superbly, but its canvas and bamboo construction had never been meant to withstand such speeds. When the beast reached the far bank and dived for the tunnel whence it had come, the flames had crept all the way to the wingtips.

"We must help him," Ader shouted at us. "Come, Picard!"

We rushed down and stopped a cab, elbowing aside a couple of peaceful burghers unaware of the ongoing drama in the sky above Toulouse. We promised the coachman the tip of a lifetime, but the last act was already being played out when we neared the walls of the Hôtel-Dieu...

The *Éole* was no more than a ghost of charred wood unable to stay aloft. The pterodactyl, realizing this, uttered a scream of undiluted malevolence and trained its rapier-sharp beak on the unfortunate Challenger. My colleague then made an inconceivably reckless choice: instead of trying to evade it, he propelled what was left of his flying machine right into the monster's maw.

The impact hurled them down to the ground, still embraced. We saw them vanish behind the nearby skyline like a comet and we heard the clatter of a very hard landing.

Doyle jumped from the coach and ran towards the site of the crash. I poured a handful of coins into the hands of the stunned coachman, who held me fast by the sleeve:

"Not so quick, my good sir! What's all this devilry?"

"An Englishman," Ader said slowly. "A marvellous man in a flying machine."

The coachman shrugged and snapped his whip. "The English – they don't know how to drink," he stated sententiously, before heading home.

Drawn by Doyle's shouts, we found Challenger trapped in the *Éole*'s wreckage. The chiropter had crashed into the old house over the quarries, bringing down part of the roof and most of one wall. The shockwave had made itself felt underground, collapsing the passageways and forever burying the door to the secret depths whence the pterodactyl had come.

Of the latter, there was not a trace.

The *Éole*'s prow, in transfixing a roof beam, had saved my unfortunate colleague's life. Notwithstanding a bloody and swollen nose, and sundry cuts to the head, he had survived a fall that would have killed anybody but him. Moving carefully, he was able to get out of the crushed cockpit and jump down to the ground.

"The bloody bird got away, Professor!" he apologized as soon as he saw me. "I'm an imbecile, a jackass. I missed it!"

"Please don't be so hard on yourself," Irène said, picking up something in the courtyard's ruins, near the now collapsed pit.

She put out her hand. In her delicate palm, there lay a claw, with a scrap of flesh still attached to one end.

"Even if it has survived, it will no longer hurt anybody. Michel is avenged!"

"I would have liked to do more," Challenger growled. "I would..."

"Please say no more, sir," Irène whispered.

She added under her breath: "Now that you know such creatures exist, you will surely hunt them down to the ends of the world. I won't follow you... My brother needs me to rebuild his *Éole* and other arias await. We will soon be going on tour in Bohemia. I will change my name somewhat and be forgotten. But I will think of your courage every time I sing and if my voice reaches as high as you did tonight, it will be thanks to you."

Challenger bowed. In spite of his cuts, of his torn clothes, and of his beard streaked with plaster dust, he appeared to us that night like a hero out of legend.

"I will hear you sing in my dreams," he said.

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Translated by Jean-Louis Trudel

Jean-Claude Dunyach is an active and popular French sf writer, whose previous stories translated for *Interzone* were "Unravelling the Thread" (issue 133), "Footprints in the Snow" (issue 150) and "All the Roads to Heaven" (issue 156). He took us by surprise with the above new one, which is quite unlike anything we have seen from him before.

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REVIEWED

The World at the Heart of the World

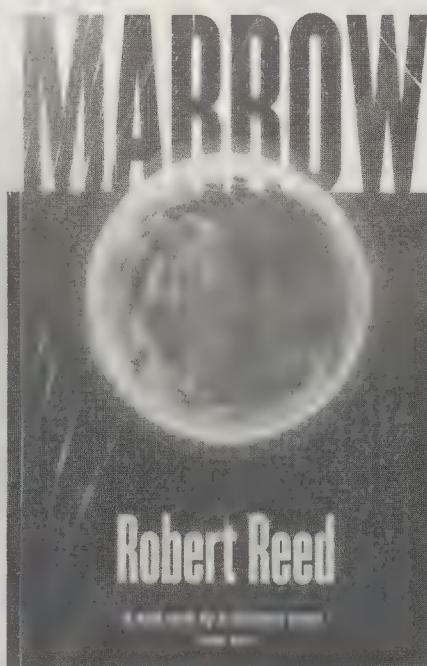
Paul J. McAuley

Science fiction's trademarks are, ostensibly, novelty, the shock of the new, the explication and elaboration of radical ideas and bleeding-edge science. But it is also a genre in which authors build careers on sequels, extended trilogies and series, in which familiarity breeds trademark recognition rather than contempt. And so, paradoxically, science-fiction writers who are cursed by the need to do something different every time often don't get the recognition they deserve. Robert Reed, author of eight novels of which only two (in a series, begun in 1994 and as yet uncompleted) are in any way similar in theme or setting, is a prime example of this paradox, but now he's delivered a novel which, by cleverly trading on the familiarity of the tropes it reshapes yet delivering a *frisson* of genuine strangeness on virtually every page, should elevate him to the ranks of the very best writers in the genre.

Marrow (Tor, \$25.95) expands one of a clutch of recent stories set in a vast spaceship built by enigmatic aliens and crewed by near-immortal humans which is engaged in a slower-than-light tour of the Galaxy, a space opera that, although perversely set almost entirely inside the spaceship in question, is nonetheless genuinely epic in the very best traditions of classic sf. The Great Ship, a big, not-so-dumb object ten times the size of Jupiter, is honeycombed with labyrinthine passages, seas, hollow habitats, ant-hill cities, moon-sized motors, oceans of liquid hydrogen fuel, and much else. Its origin and purpose (and apparent intelligence) are unknown to the humans who salvaged it and, having turned it into a commercial liner, now comprise its near-

immortal crew. There are thousands of captains, each a hero in his or her own right, under the command of the ship's Master; there is a race of post-human Remora who maintain the outside of the hull, where they have built domed cities straight off the covers of 1940s pulp magazines; there are billions of alien and human short- and long-term passengers. It is a place ripe with Story, and at the heart of this great construct is a mystery: Marrow, a violent world of iron and earthquakes and volcanoes, the place where the riddles of the Great Ship's origin and purpose may be answered.

A group of captains sent to explore Marrow are marooned when the bridge they have built to reach the



world is broken, and the passageway they have bored through the cold iron surrounding it is sealed. They take 5,000 years to build a civilization advanced enough to escape the trap, meanwhile discovering that Marrow slowly expands and contracts like a great heart, and that something – either the Great Ship's Builders or their mortal enemy – may inhabit the centre of the world at the centre of their Great Ship.

Marrow's exiles split early on between the Loyalists, led by Miocene, a cold and ruthless Submaster, and the wild Waywards, led by Miocene's son, who believes he has been vouchsafed a vision by the Builders. When at last the way back into the main part of the ship is rebuilt, Miocene leads a revolution against the Great Ship's Master, but is challenged by her son, leader of an army of billions of fanatic Waywards. It is left to Washen, a relatively young but brilliant captain, allied with a colourful renegade, to try to win back the ship.

Reed elegantly refurbishes the well-worn tropes of his story – a vast and ancient artefact left by mysterious, god-like aliens; shipwreck on a hostile planet; humans stumbling all unknowing into a plot greater than they can imagine – and conveys an authentically chilly sense of post-human estrangement. A century can pass in a sentence, millennia between chapters, and characters whose bodies can be repaired and regrown by artificial survival genes inflict upon themselves and others tortures and mutilations as terrible as any to be found in the most bloody *grand guignol*. Miocene keeps the severed heads of her enemies, alive but slowly desiccating, as ghastly trophies; a stowaway seals himself within a tunnel of carbonaceous tar and incinerates his body, because reincarnation is his only hope of reaching the Great Ship; the menu of a funeral feast:

... was borrowed from a species of cold deep-space aliens. The captains destroyed their mouths with a ritualistic bite of a methane-ice fruit.

This twist on the classic theme of immortality, intricately elaborated into a society as structured and bound by ritual as dynastic China, is typical of the ingenuity of Reed's seamless and ambitious feat of world-building. Rich in genre echoes, casually encompassing the vast expanses of space and time which are sf's native habitat, *Marrow* is an extraordinary and extraordinarily intelligent novel stuffed with wonder and wit.

If the narrative of Reed's *Marrow* is a deep but narrow slice through time, that of Sean McMullen's *The Miocene Arrow* (Tor, \$27.95) is a panorama as



broad and crowded as one of those Breughel canvases in which every square centimetre is occupied by someone busy at some emblematic task. It's the sequel, largely self-contained, to *Souls in the Great Machine*, a post-collapse novel set in Australia 2,000 years from now, when human civilization was bound by Sentinel satellites which destroyed any electrical technology, and by the telepathic Call which swept across land at regular intervals and compelled humans and other large animals to walk towards their death at the ocean's edge. Like Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (in which technology was limited by Papal decree), *Souls in the Great Machine* was crammed with all manner of ingenious steampunk machinery: clockwork call-anchors; sail-powered trains; heliographic signal networks; and, most importantly, a Calculor which employed the brain-power of dozens of human components. Use of the Calculor enabled the novel's scientist-hero, Zavora, to conquer neighbouring territories and contact a network of artificial intelligences lurking on the Moon, where they were building with patient redundancy a Mirrorsun to protect Earth from global warming. By the end of *Souls in the Great Machine*, Zavora had convinced the AIs to destroy the Sentinels, and Australia was reaping the benefit of the AIs' nanotechnology, including long-range solar-powered aircraft.

The Miocene Arrow shifts the story to what was once the United States, where the Call is even stronger, limiting human civilization to a few strongholds such as Mounthaven, divided into tiny dominions which traditionally settle disputes by chivalric aerial combat between Wardens in little diesel-powered sailwings. The parameters of *The Miocene Arrow* are perhaps more contrived than those of its predecessor – like impartial judges in a war game, the Sentinels (whose destruction is unknown to the Mounthaven dominions at the beginning of the novel) limited the size of machines to no more than 29 feet six inches, and their speed to 125 mph; the Call extends to the upper storeys of tall buildings, but not to aircraft above a certain height – but are skilfully used to frame a huge story of war with an equally huge cast (for once, this reader would have found a list of *dramatis personae* useful rather than ornamental).

A renegade group of aviads, a race genetically engineered in the 21st century to resist the Call and living secretly amongst humans ever since, have moved to America using those solar-powered aircraft. They have introduced the concept of total war to one of Mounthaven's dominions,

Greater Bartolica, as part of their plan to deploy a weapon which could cause the extinction of all unmodified humans. Secretly helped by the aviads, who have built onto the existing tram system a kind of internet, Greater Bartolica quickly overruns its neighbour, Yarran, but the Yarranese Wardens fight back against overwhelming odds (the parallel with the Second World War's Battle of Britain is deep and deliberate), helped in turn by Theresla, an aviad fighting against the fanatics, and John Glasken, an amiable but capable rogue, and hero of *Souls in the Great Machine*.

McMullen's prose is plain but lucid, and, nicely enriched with low human comedy, coincidence and farce, is perfectly suited to explication of his crowded story of heroism and cupidity in this cross between an old-fashioned air-ace adventure and Arthurian Romance (Glasken becomes a kind of King under the Hill; the young fliers consult *Chivalry and the Art of Duelling*, and *The Practice of Romantic Chivalry*). The level of invention of *The Miocene Arrow* may be lower than in its predecessor (the sailwings are constrained by physics to behave like any aircraft, and the workings of the tram-based internet are rather more opaque than those of the Calculor), but there's much to enjoy: the discovery (in a scene echoing Walter Miller's post-nuclear war *A Canticle for Leibowitz*) of an ancient diary describing the origin of the Call; a thwarted and very affecting romance between the first woman to become a warden and a young air ace obsessed with the number 13; massacres, duels, spies, and much else. McMullen ties up the numerous plot twists with an admirable facility, and the final pages are imbued with the burgeoning sense

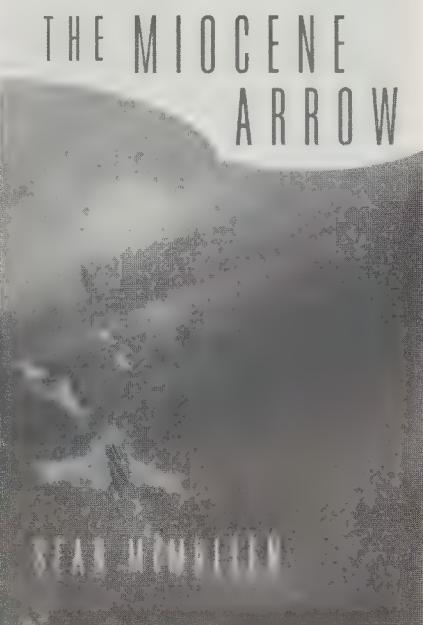
that the diptych of *Souls in the Great Machine* and *The Miocene Arrow* is destined to become a classic.

In *Eater* (Eos, \$24), as in his last two novels, *Cosm* and *The Martian Race*, Gregory Benford blends the swift pace of a science-fiction thriller with an acute portrayal of scientists at work. The scientists are astronomers working at the High Energy Astrophysics Center in Hawaii; they detect a strange signal, quickly parse down the possibilities to a black hole that's just beyond the orbit of Pluto and closing fast. Not only that, but it is chasing down stray ice asteroids – it is guided by a strange entity, dubbed by one of the scientists the Eater of All Things, which inhabits tightly woven magnetic fields around the black hole. And once contact is established, it becomes clear that the Eater wants more than mere mass, or even knowledge. An ancient epicurean wanderer, it demands a sacrifice humanity is not prepared to make.

Eater carries its genre baggage lightly. Although it has the traditional structure of a First Contact novel – scientists worrying out the meaning of a puzzling signal, the sudden deluge of knowledge which changes the world forever – Benford casts the story through the narrow aperture of an uneasy triangular human relationship formed by Dr Benjamin Knowlton, whose research group spots the anomalous signal, his ex-astronaut wife, Channing, who is dying of cancer, and Knowlton's rival and Channing's one-time lover, the British Astronomer Royal, Kingsley Dart. While these tangled relationships are never properly resolved, Benford nicely deploys them to show how scientists are able to rise above petty human rivalry to greater glory. Here, the scientist is hero, intelligence is a virtue, knowledge is the grail. In a key scene, Knowlton ignores protocol and tells the President exactly what must be done, and the President gives way at once. The social upheavals caused by news of the Eater and its demands, and the disasters caused by its canny manipulation of Earth's weather, are mostly glimpsed in out-of-focus long shots. A shadowy intelligence agency makes a ritual appearance, but stays in the shadows.

The heart of this thriller is not the thrust and counterthrust of plot, but the scientific explication of the true nature of the Eater. Benford expertly juggles the play of intricate ideas, an economically evoked sense of the Eater's ten-billion-year history, and a desperate plan in which Channing finds a final affirmation, to deliver a lucid sense of the triumph of the mind.

Also noted:





Regular readers of *Interzone* will know from his short stories that Paul Di Filippo is far too restless and much too playful to be bound by genre conventions. So too with his novels: *Ciphers* was a pop culture conspiracy; *Would It Kill You To Smile* (written with Michael Bishop under the *nom de plume* Philip Lawson) was a murder mystery caper. And Di Filippo's second solo novel, *Joe's Liver* (Cambrian Publications, \$40), is a short, hectically paced contemporary picaresque satire about an innocent

cast loose in America's moronic inferno.

Reader's Digest, aka Ardy, is an orphan from a small, obscure Caribbean island, named for the magazines on which he was found cushioned as a baby, and "in whose pages [he has] discovered the entire world – and most particularly America." Setting out to reach the home of his favourite magazine, in Pleasantville, NY, Ardy is robbed and abandoned by the man he has paid to smuggle him across the US-Canadian border,

encounters a right-wing militia led by a racist vet, an older woman who takes him as both chauffeur and lover, a radical student activist, and the drunken leader of a kind of Children's Crusade of alarmingly silent Mexican Indians. Everyone tries to make Ardy into something he is not, but his innocent belief in the essential goodness of the American dream survives untouched in this sweet and canny burlesque which turns American imperialism on its head.

Paul J. McAuley

The idea that a single individual might somehow become so rich that he could create his own, ideal "realm," to give ultimate expression to his personal whimsy, goes back a long way. In one sense, it lies at the heart of all utopian literature from Plato on, though the question of how it should actually be financed was first put by Poe, in an atrocious piece of fustian called "The Domain of Arnheim." That work specifies no human inhabitants, though Sylphs, Fairies, Genii and Gnomes are freely invoked; more recently and more fully realized we have had Jack Vance's eponymous Palace of Love, and the nameless Village in which the numbered Prisoner contended with an endless succession of Number Twos. Real life has seen the efforts of the Levers and the Cadburys, but to stock Port Sunlight and Bourneville they had to rely on their employees, while the perpetrators of sundry grubby little theocracies have been limited to such inadequates as will willingly surrender their possessions, their labour and their freedom for a smile from the Master.

I was therefore surprised and gratified to encounter *The Other Side* (Dedalus, £9.99) by Alfred Kubin, a work which first appeared in German in 1908, now re-translated by Mike Mitchell. Patera, the founder of the Dream Realm, sets about his project in a commendably forthright spirit: he buys up some 1200 square miles in Central Asia, expels such inhabitants as he finds distasteful (retaining only an unlikely tribe of blue-eyed Mongols), and sets about building Pearl, a city of some 65,000 adults. To avoid the sense of newness and lack of tradition that so irked Viole Falushe, he imports numerous old, and in some cases ominous, buildings in knock-down form; and he populates them simply enough by bribing interesting individuals to come and live there.

They find Pearl rather easier to enter than to leave, and this is the first-person story of an artist whom Patera inveigles to work on a newspaper, but thereafter ignores with the insouciance of the super-rich. Well enough, but there's an additional and unwelcome sense of unreality stem-

Private Realms

Chris Gilmore

ming from Mitchell's translation. Though the prose flows freely, many of his idioms jar against both period and the present day. If you're attempting to recapture the spirit of the 1930s it's OK for your characters to enjoin each other to keep their chins up, or retire



to don their "best bib and tucker"; but it won't do for either the opening or the closing decade of the 20th century. Intentional, even discordant, archaism would have served Mitchell better, in a city which everyone knows to be little over a decade old but which pretends to the antiquity of Malacia or Gormenghast.

Sadly, by the time the narrator gets there, Pearl is beginning to unravel. The bureaucracy had always been obstructive and incompetent in a way that prefigures Kafka, and the economy had never made much sense; but presently the newcomers all seem to be copies of existing inhabitants, presumably through Patera's imagination running out; the physical fabric of the city, then the moral fabric of its citizens, suffer accelerated decay; there are plagues of noxious animals; and the book concludes amid scenes of squalor, murder and excess which but a handful survive.

All good fun, but ultimately the book is less than the sum of its parts. Almost all the scenes work individually, but there's no sense of structure; even the disasters which afflict Pearl are arbitrary in their character and order of presentation. To impose some shape, Kubin introduces an American millionaire who seeks to wrest control of Pearl from Patera (but may be a secondary personality of his). But as he has no obvious motive, and Patera offers only the feeblest resistance, his irrelevance is rapidly exposed. The conclusion is a self-indulgent stream of verbiage which looks as if it's supposed to contain an allegory, and maybe does; but if so, I doubt that it's worth seeking out.

This book is of historical interest, and I suspect that (mainly at several removes) its influence has been substantial; but Kubin's inability to impart any momentum to his story damns it in the end. If you want to see something similar done really well, read *Lord of the Flies* or J. G. Ballard's *High Rise*.

When a publisher chooses a name like "Ministry of Whimsy," it's a safe bet that he's publishing crap. A serious betting man might like to



wager on whether he's eclectic, or specializes in a particular line of crap. I consequently had no great expectations of Jeffrey Thomas's *Punktown* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, \$11.99), a collection of stories loosely linked by the milieu of Paxton, a city on a planet colonized by a variety of species, principally mankind.

But after the first couple of stories, I kissed my imaginary chips goodbye. They were excellently written explorations of extreme, but all too human, psychological states; and though in both cases the alien landscape was pure window-dressing, and the endings lacked crispness, the psychological observations (of a pervert who clones his own flesh for violation by other, more conventional, perverts, and of a rape-victim who has chosen mnemonic erasure, and now wishes she had not), the writing was elegant and economical. Even so... how about some equally elegant construction, and a bit less moral fence-sitting? Thomas obliged with the third tale, "Wakizashi," in which the humane values of a prison guard are deftly contrasted with the pious humbug of a prison chaplain, as both confront a series of perverse and violent acts committed by two sets of humans, and two species of aliens.

That is by far the best story in the book, but none of the others is bad, and my only objection is that they all tread familiar ground. The line between exploration of semi-piternal truths and triumphant discovery of the obvious is a fine one, and Sturgeon's Revelation is relevant. The general effect (as usual) is that what's true isn't new and what's new isn't true, especially when Thomas panders to the sentimental (in "Heart for Heart's Sake") or to the hysterical (in "Face"). Moreover, despite his protestations, as a milieu Paxton (known to its inhabitants as "Punktown") has no persona of its own apart from the local obsession (very rare in sf) with celebrating Christmas. It might be anywhere, and the aliens are very much the common run of aliens. Thomas is the literary heir of O. Henry, and if you fancy your hand at pastiche, you could try rewriting the lot in the style and milieu of *The Four Million*.

Even so, this much good writing, in slim but elegant trade-paperback format, is dirt cheap at the price (about ten cents a page). I hope it sells so well that the publishers change to a grown-up name on the strength of it.

A new book by Darrell Schweitzer is always matter for rejoicing, and while this is true of *Nightscape*s (Wildside Press, \$17.50 pb, \$35 hc), his latest collection, rejoicing is slightly muted, for a minor and a major reason. The minor reason is



that it's stiff with the sort of errors one makes when editing on screen; one recasts a sentence, but leaves in a word from the previous syntax. The major reason is that there's no momentum against the background of his earlier work.

This isn't to deny that the stories are expertly crafted and evocatively written – indeed, that's part of the problem; one reads an opening paragraph which announces that here comes an *homage* to Dunsany, or an updated approach to the Lovecraft mythos, or an addition to his own Delta world, or a sidelong take on King Arthur, and that's exactly what one gets – just like last time. Schweitzer has always been an intensely literary writer, but you can't be literary in that sense without also being derivative, and that which is predictably derivative cannot surprise. More worryingly, when he tries the odd experiment it doesn't generally work. "The Voice of Bel-Hamad," for instance, is a Delta story told in the first person by a eunuch. Now, as viewpoint characters, eunuchs offer certain difficulties which men, women and children do not, and to resolve them takes space. I had gotten well into this one, and was looking forward to seeing how Schweitzer would cope (*Cry to Heaven?* *Count Belisarius?* *The Persian Boy?*) when it ended abruptly – it was not, of course, Chapter 1 of a novel – or was it? Was it perhaps Chapter 1 of a novel Schweitzer found he couldn't write after all? I dunno, but that's how it reads.

Other failures are more conventional. "Caliban's Revenge" attempts to do in 12 pages what Tad Williams did in a highly compressed novel (reviewed in *Interzone* 95), and inevitably suffers by contrast; "Return from Exile" is essentially the same story as Heinlein's notorious *I Will*

Fear No Evil, and who wants to be reminded of that? "Kvetchula" is a heavy-handed Jewish vampire-joke which I simply didn't find funny, and as I enjoyed both *Love at First Bite* and William Tenn's "My Mother Was a Witch," I'm inclined to blame the execution rather than the form; "Adam" is simply a trite little piece which I'm sure bored Schweitzer to write even more than it bored me to read.

The book concludes with "Time Enough for Lunacy," another of his Tom o' Bedlam stories, which isn't really a failure – leastways, on his part; it may be one on mine, because although I enjoyed it hugely and picked up most of the references (I think) I came away with no more idea of what it was about than when I started. *Mea (maybe) culpa*; but since I'd regarded the first such story as an unrepeatable one-off, it reinforced my conclusion that Schweitzer has hit a plateau. Aho! If he trundles around it for the rest of his life, I'll be along for the ride; but I really hope he uses it to take off for yet more wondrous worlds.

Reviewing Graham Edwards's *Stone and Sky* in *IZ* 145, I dismissed it as a failure, though of the nobler sort. Edwards had essayed something ambitious and highly original, and not really been equal to the task. Undaunted, he has now produced a sequel, *Stone and Sea* (Voyager, £5.99), and if all had their rights, I'd be decrying it for possessing all the vices of the previous volume, plus a singularly inelegant resolution to the (previously unaddressed) problem of the behaviour of fluids in a milieu of such capricious gravity. Just as inelegantly, he brings back the dragon Archan, who was supposed to have been permanently banished by the Queen of the Faeries at the end of the last book. Moreover, Edwards continues to crowd his world with variously preposterous inhabitants, including vicious dryads; apathetic, hedonistic selkies; a tree-elemental with a vocabulary of singularly irritating fustian; and a gigantic sea-goddess who would surely arouse the envy of Michael Shea. Meanwhile Jonah, his hero, is just as vain and pompous as ever; when Annie, his girlfriend, drops him in favour of Gerent, who is handsomer, cleverer and better-mannered than himself (and can fly to boot) his immediate assumption is that she must have fallen victim to a malevolent magic – not that she's made a rational and predictable choice.

And yet... to my consternation, I found the book growing on me. A hero ought to have the odd fault; though Edwards isn't a brilliant stylist, his prose doesn't grate; his characters are effectively if crudely differentiated;



BOOKS

the world of Stone and its inhabitants may be preposterous, but they're obviously very real to their creator, and he has deployed considerable ingenuity to sustain its internal logic; and yes, I truly found myself caring about how Jonah would

On the face of it, Peter James and Christopher Kenworthy would not seem to have much in common. The former, here with his 13th novel (unlucky for some, as it transpires), and the latter, with his first. James with his "literary niche, somewhere between Stephen King and Michael Crichton" (in the words of the *Mail on Sunday*), and Kenworthy – although still in his early 30s – with a background behind him as the editor of his own company and one of the finest practitioners of what became known as "miserabilism." But the themes of faith and forgiveness, of trust and trustworthiness, are undeniably common breaths.

Peter James's *Faith* (Orion, £9.99) – and we might as well say this early on – is by no means a bad book. Nor is it a particularly good one. Two years ago, I reviewed *The Truth* by the same author and found, in a smoothly supernatural story which looked at the themes of money and poverty, the plot-hook being the desire for a child – a perfectly gripping tale. What I did not expect, on commencing *Faith*, was to find a plot which orbited the earlier book's central interests. While of course no claim is being made that the two books are mere carbon copies, nor indeed is any *complaint* being offered about a simple repetition of themes (some of my favourite writers have repeated their themes throughout their careers), there does seem to be a *formulaic* aroma in the air. Though completely up-to-date, it is nonetheless covered in dust; easy to read, yet not difficult enough. It is a book of pulls and pushes, where every quality bargains with a meaty disadvantage, and the reader emerges with a sense of scarcely victored negation.

Although *Faith* goes against the established cliché of one step forward and two steps back – the obverse is certainly true – there is, at the end, little more than a blob of words and images, and a routinely consumed half-week.

Peter James, a dab hand at brisk titles which at first seem (simultaneously) as vague as fog and as sharp as a diamond – *The Truth*, of course, *Denial*, *Twilight* – has given us a title which is possibly relevant for ten or twelve reasons, but let us concentrate on four of them. First of all, *Faith* is the name of the female lead: an intelligent but browbeaten woman who is married to a vile, domineering plastic surgeon. Not least of this man's pecu-

fare, whether he would regain Annie's affections (and if so, how the pair of them would square matters with Gerent), and whether Archan would truly succeed in tearing down the world of Stone. The conclusion is obvious: for all its faults, the Stone trilogy is on

course to become a cult novel. So, Reader, is your current cult wearing a little thin? You could do worse than take a dive into Stone – but start with the first volume; Edwards, rightly, provides few data-dumps.

Chris Gilmore

Truth, and the rich scumbag's request for a married woman to be the surrogate mother of his child.) Also, the husband spies, he eavesdrops; he is rich enough to hire private detectives and to monitor his wife's mobile-phone conversations. Feeling that she owes him a considerable debt, he climbs out of his pram if his cigar and drink aren't ready when he comes home, and he slaps the child about.

This surgeon did something awful when he was a child, as we see in flashback from very early on, and it does not take much to anticipate that he will do something awful again. He knows he is losing his wife – (a) to another school of medical thought, because she learns, despite her husband's unwillingness to reveal the fact to her, that she is seriously ill, and she strengthens her beliefs in alternative healing; and (b) to another man, with whom she falls in love, and who hopes to make her better – in every sense, the Faith-Healer...

But *Faith* is a pertinent title for one more reason. By writing a novel whose denouement is predictable by the end of chapter four; and by producing a plot which feels like doing the ironing or the washing-up – as something we need to go through in order to shift on to the next thing; and by offering a novel in which there are neither wasted words nor any inspired emotion, Peter James has proved that his implied audience's *faith in him* has been well-founded. His regular readers will love this. And his regular readers, presumably, are those who thoroughly enjoy nippy thrillers which conclude with the final turn of the page, rather than living on for a little while – or for a long while – in the mind. After all, it speaks volumes that the plaudits quoted on this book were meted out by middlebrow publications which are themselves paradigms of pedantic and run-of-the-mill writing: where trigger-happy, simple, lazy comparisons (Crichton, King) are *good enough*, and where a celebration of a book that feels ready-cooked, but with insufficient seasoning, is not only acceptable but encouraged.

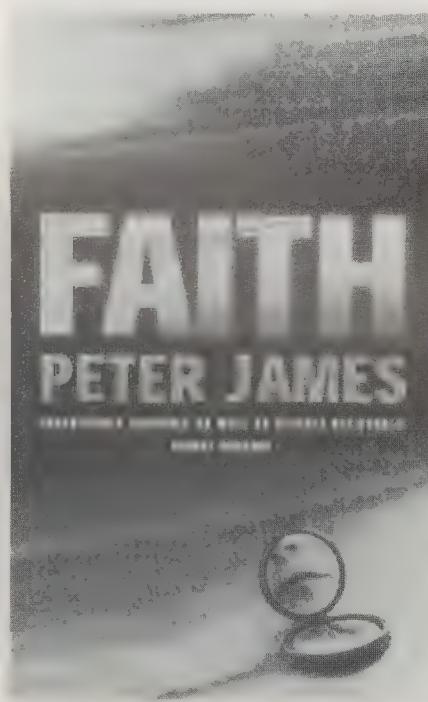
When Peter James releases new work, I want to read it – to know that this author, who clearly can write a reasonable sentence, can write another good novel. I'd like to think that he can do something *different*.

The *Winter Inside* by Christopher Kenworthy (Serpent's Tail, £10),

Faith and Forgiveness

David Mathew

liarities is his tendency to wish grafts, nips and tucks on his wife, in order to model her into a supposed perfection: beauty of course being in the eye of the beholder – or the Beast. (See *The*

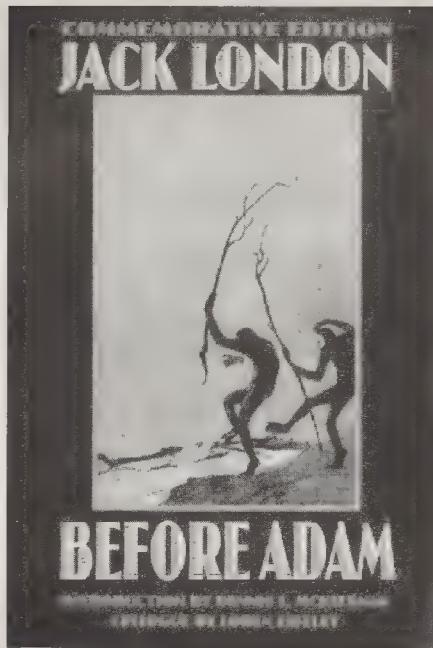


on the other hand, is a fabulous, assured debut novel. The first half, which is also the most painful half, examines the woes and vicissitudes of an art teacher's relationship with a younger woman; but it also views the woman's relationship with her own family, and then, of course, the art teacher's relationship with her family (mother's a darling, father's a tyrant). Not to mention the teacher's relationship with his friend, and the friend's relationship with his girlfriend... It is all acutely described, and drum-tight, with an interesting and impressive use of frames in evidence. These early sections are shot at extreme close-up and the delineations of breakdown, abortion decisions, arguments, inertia, ennui, paranoia and alcoholism, are harrowing.

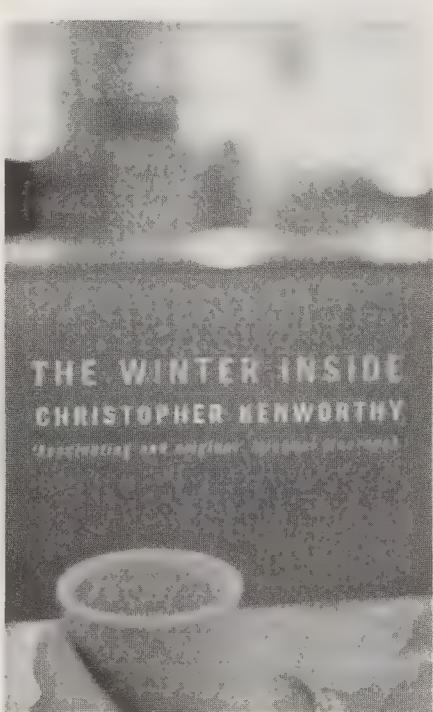
Kenworthy places emphasis on minutiae. The little things really do matter, and they can hurt, because they cannot exist in isolation. "The flat stank of Wendy," he writes at a point in the book where the affair has to be autopsied. "It was as though she'd left little bombs of perfume behind to prevent me forgetting. I'd cleaned the sheets immediately and hoovered to avoid finding hairs and fluff from clothes of hers, but I kept finding smells that reminded me of her..." Or, a page later: "I got as far as putting the deodorant bottle in the bin but couldn't bring myself to throw it out. The most frustrating thing was that it was only teasing me, because it reminded me of the smell that was above hers, not her skin... The only time the memory of her smell came back was on waking, when I'd smell my own skin, heat in the sheets, and think she was beside me."

Wendy's mother wants to leave her husband, too, and one confidently but erroneously foresees a full-blown affair with the teacher. Needless to say, however, things cannot continue as they are. Events are brilliantly, sometimes perfectly described, but there is a god of plot, and with this deity a writer may not haggle: matters must develop. If not the teacher/mother combination, then what? The tyrannical father, of course; it seems quite logical in retrospect, but to Kenworthy's credit, I was happily wrongfooted and sent in another direction. The author opens up the novel and goes for the wide shot, the pan, when I thought he would become even more introspective.

The Winter Inside is unreservedly recommended. Its structure is thoughtful, every paragraph is poised and frequently edgy. Obsession and the tendency to devour are examined: examined in prose so shining, deep and clean – and so polluted underneath, dragging anything, anyone, any eye, down...



In a week in which London's *Metro* newspaper (a daily freebie) reported that "Fat British men are regressing to the shape of their prehistoric ancestors because they spend too long slumped in front of the TV," it was interesting to receive Jack London's *Before Adam* (Bison Books, \$12). The article concludes with the following warning: "Millions of years after Man became upright, Millennium Man is stooping lower and lower... This could cause problems in years to come, with lots of men experiencing lower back pain." Well, perhaps; but there is a more terrifying connection with the distant past for the narrator of *Before Adam* to deal with!



Our narrator is plagued, from his childhood on, by frightening dreams ("My nights marked the reign of fear – and such fear!") – and these dreams are of vicious times, "of the Fire People and the Tree People, and the gibbering councils of the horde." But these scenes are more than our usual flights of fancy. The narrator, for example, knows the taste of blueberries before he has actually eaten one in what we refer to as real life. (This book brings to mind that old philosophical chestnut about the mutability of reality. How can we be sure we are not in bed, or in a laboratory now, dreaming this very moment? There are African tribes, after all, which place as much meaning on dreams as on the waking life.) Race memories are being experienced.

"In my sleep," as the author writes, "it was not my wake-a-day personality that took charge of me; it was another and distinct personality, possessing a new and totally different fund of experiences, and, to the point of my dreaming, possessing memories of those totally different experiences... He lived in the long ago, when the world was young, in that period that we call the Mid-Pleistocene. He fell from the trees but did not strike bottom. He gibbered with fear at the roaring of the lions..."

Originally serialized in *Everybody's Magazine*, October 1906 to February 1907, *Before Adam* is the latest in the line of reissues from Bison Books, and follows on the heels of the same author's *Fantastic Tales*, which of the two is undoubtedly stronger. But still, this "commemorative edition" is worth buying. By writing stories in which the defiance of forces and time is applauded, Jack London has driven a stake through the heart of time. He has pinned his reputation to a moment.

Unfortunately, so has the writer of this volume's introduction, Dennis L. McKiernan: a rough-and-ready introduction if ever I read one. It's not that I expect the equivalent of Lionel Trilling every time I see a book introduced; but I do like to feel that more than a slapdash scuttle through the memory banks has been achieved. Encountering constructions such as these – "And so he tells the story of a barely above ape near-man, and it is one heckuva tale, one that rightfully can be called a truly splendid fantasy" – I even doubt the validity and wisdom of my supposed tutor. And that's a shame – because an epilogue, "Jack London, Evolutionist" by Loren Eiseley (from the 1962 reprint) has also been included, and is interesting; and there is a useful cast list, and reviews, good and bad, of the first edition. A worthy addition to the collection.

David Mathew



BOOKS

REVIEWED

I've never really rated John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. Nearly all the dramatic bits are reported after the event, depriving them of any sense of urgency, and that opening line about a Wednesday seeming like a Sunday makes the narrator sound like a pompous middle-class bore. Or perhaps that's just my interpretation?

Chivers Word For Word Audio Books have released an unabridged recording of the novel, a straight reading by the actor Samuel West. I can say at once that his interpretation has changed my attitude of cool indifference into one of enthusiasm. In the book, the narrator is an ordinary guy giving a reasonably objective account of a catastrophe. The same is true of the audiobook, but the difference is, you can hear the remembered fear in West's voice as he recalls being thrust into a drastically changed world whilst deprived of his sight. This is no mechanical reading, and West maintains the tension throughout; by the end, I'd stopped thinking of the book as a cosy catastrophe.

The story itself is well worth revisiting, not least as a reminder for when Simon Clark's sequel comes out. It's badly dated in places, but that's part of the fun – never mind gender roles, check out those attitudes to sex itself! On the other hand, it's about as prophetic as sf gets, demonstrating that those fears about genetically modified crops date right back to 1951. 8 cassettes, 9 hrs 30 mins, £15.95. Word For Word Audio Books published by Chivers Press Limited, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX. Tel 01225 335336; Fax 01225 310771.

Big Finish Productions continue to release a *Doctor Who* play each month, the last four bringing the total up to ten. From the fan point of view, they seem to be delivering the goods – they've brought back the best monsters, and arranged the long-awaited "official" meeting between Colin Baker's Doctor and Nicholas Courtney's Brigadier. In terms of audio production, the standards are generally very good, although there are still unfortunate lapses, particularly where alien voices are concerned. As dramas, they are very much less successful; the same old story turns are churned out with monotonous regularity (I lost count of the "unexpected" betrayals by characters thought to be trustworthy) and some of the supposedly clever dialogue is anything but. As far as science-fictional elements are concerned – ideas, world building, credible aliens and so on – they're not even trying. Best of the lot, despite some surprisingly poor acting and direction, is Mike Tucker's *The Genocide Machine*, starring Sylvester McCoy and Sophie Aldred. The TARDIS lands

on Kar-Charrat, a planet where it rains all the time and where an exclusive library has attracted the attention of a bunch of Daleks. While the story doesn't stand up to intellectual scrutiny – one really has to listen with one's brain in neutral – it does work on a fairy-tale sort of level, especially where the exotic native life is concerned. The Daleks themselves, unencumbered by the ridiculous Davros, are particularly effective, barking out their orders, their threats and their propaganda with gusto. The word is they'll be returning to battle other Doctors, and feature in Doctorless adventures, which can't be bad.

Justin Richards' *Red Dawn*, starring Peter Davison, Nicola Bryant and some Ice Warriors, begins with a manned landing on Mars. Not an unusual event in sf, perhaps, but I was somewhat taken aback by the similarities between this particular landing and the one at the climax of Stephen Baxter's *Voyage* (see issue 149 for review of audio adaptation). Coincidence, or an unofficial sequel? Whichever, the remainder of the play comprises some of the thinnest material I have yet encountered in audio sf – and some of the most idiotic. Imagine Neil Armstrong declaring war on an advanced race of moon men and you'll get the idea. Get the Baxter instead.

In Nicholas Pegg's *The Spectre of Lanyon Moor*, the TARDIS touches down in contemporary Cornwall. Perhaps I'm missing something here, but surely the whole point of featuring a

TARDIS in a story is that it allows characters to journey into history, the future, or other worlds where they can have the sort of adventure that they couldn't have had if they'd stayed at home? In which case, why are the majority of Doctor Who stories of recent years so damned parochial, and so damned similar?

Lanyon Moor holds no surprises – it's pretty much a rewrite of *The Daemons* and a handful of other TV stories, some of them more than a quarter of a century old. There's some enjoyable character interaction between Colin Baker, Maggie Stables, Nicholas Courtney and James Bolam as they investigate a mysterious fog, but it's quickly obvious that they're not going to uncover anything interesting – just another silly little alien who wants to destroy the Earth, only you know he won't succeed because that would contradict continuity.

I had higher hopes for *Winter for the Adept*, written by Andrew Cartmel, one of the few Doctor Who novelists who doesn't write like a fan. Set in a finishing school in the Alps circa 1963, it starts off well enough with a years-after-the-event reading from a diary accompanied by a beautiful musical score by Russell Stone. I thought this might herald a welcome change in approach to scene setting – straight narration rather than descriptive dialogue, seeing as how the latter sounds a little forced at times. But all too soon characters are telling each other what they're doing, which includes running away from inexplicably ambulant pianos with lethal intentions. Neither funny nor scary, and with a denouement little different to (and no better than) the one in *Lanyon Moor*.

In theory there's no reason why Doctor Who shouldn't be good sf, and good drama. When it was a low-budget TV series for children, millions of people could believe that a schoolmistress might take on the Aztec empire, that our heroes could be trapped in an Escher painting or an alien TV set, or that a gentle race of mathematicians could hold back the heat death of the universe. Despite its limitations it could be bizarre, beautiful and awesome. It could also be laughably bad, of course, but at least the authors tried to do something different each time without relying on what had gone before. Given the enormous strengths of the audio medium, it is a shame that Big Finish have generally failed to attract the sort of authors who might have taken this lesson to heart.

Doctor Who plays are double CD (£13.99) or double tape (£9.99) comprising four 25-minute episodes, from Big Finish Productions Ltd, PO Box 1127, Maidenhead, Berks SL6 3LN

Paul Beardsley

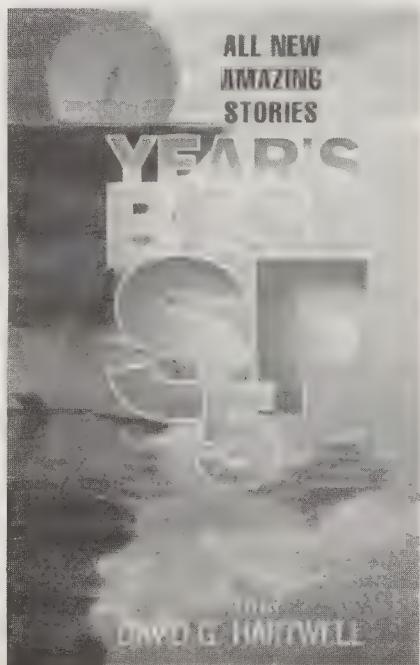
Vision Impaired: Audio Reviews

Paul Beardsley

Gardner Dozois casts an ample shadow, and this is nowhere more evident than in a consideration of David G. Hartwell's anthology *Year's Best SF 5* (HarperCollins/Eos, \$6.99). In 1996, Hartwell set out to challenge the monopoly then exercised by Dozois's *Annual Collections* (published by St Martin's Press) of the best short fiction contemporary sf had to offer. But although Hartwell's HarperCollins anthologies have reached their fifth year and promise to continue, they are still overshadowed: where Dozois's collections are hardcovers and trade paperbacks, Hartwell's are mass-market paperbacks; where Dozois has over 600 large pages to fill, Hartwell has fewer than 500 small ones, and must perforce avoid novellas; and where Dozois is the editor of *Asimov's Science Fiction* and consequently steeped in every short story on the market, Hartwell is a book editor, and can't, for want of time, cover quite as copious a ground in his selections (or so it often seems). So: Hartwell tries hard, but his volumes appear, if not emaciated by comparison with Dozois's great tomes, at least a bit thin.

But this leaves considerable room for good short sf. Although... Again, novellas do not feature, and some stories present, like Elizabeth Malartrie's lame and clichéd "Evolution Never Sleeps," and Fred Lerner's amateurish "Rosetta Stone," had better been left with the slush. And it's unimaginable how the usually solid Robert J. Sawyer was coaxed into producing a silly squib like "The Blue Planet"... Despite these reservations, there is much of real quality here.

The best of the Best, in this case, are stories by less well-known writers, and tend to come in pairs. "Valour" by Chris Beckett (originally in *Interzone*)



In the Shadow

Nick Gevers

and "100 Candles" by Curt Wohleber echo each other both in their great imaginative vividness and in their neat summation of how things unattainably alien might yet signify much for humanity. Cory Doctorow in "Visit the Sins" and Chris Lawson in "Written in Blood" deliver memorable judgments on how speculated medical developments might affect people's ability to define – and remain – themselves. And two further *Interzone* entries, "Lifework" by Mary Soon Lee and "Freckled Figure" by Hiroe Suga, discuss future social attitudes with precisely judged combinations of irony and compassion. This book deserves praise simply for calling these tales to wider notice.

Established names also do themselves credit here. Kim Stanley Robinson's "Sexual Dimorphism," an episode from his collection *The Martians*, explores gender politics very ably, although in that department a sharper cutting edge is employed by Lucy Sussex in "The Queen of Erewhon", a witty Le Guinian account of polyandry and lesbianism in a post-holocaust New Zealand. Terry Bisson's "Macs" handles the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing with characteristic satiric savagery. "Huddle" by Stephen Baxter is another of that apocalyptic ironists's chilling visions of drastic evolutionary transformation; Geoff Ryman's "Everywhere" (yet another *Interzone* inclusion) tackles utopian issues with peculiarly effective obliqueness; "Border Guards" (*Interzone* again) is a worthy, if not brilliant, follow-up to earlier investigations by Greg Egan of the existential difficulties posed by artificial immortality; and Michael Swanwick much more disturbingly addresses another side of the same issue in the short and sharp "Ancient Engines." Michael Bishop's poem "Secrets of the Alien Reliquary" is a lucidly succinct reflection on the matter Chris Beckett broached so brilliantly in "Valour"...

But even well-known authors are fallible, and Hartwell, probably out of misplaced respect, has shown a few of them to their disadvantage. Gene Wolfe with his slyly pedestrian "Has

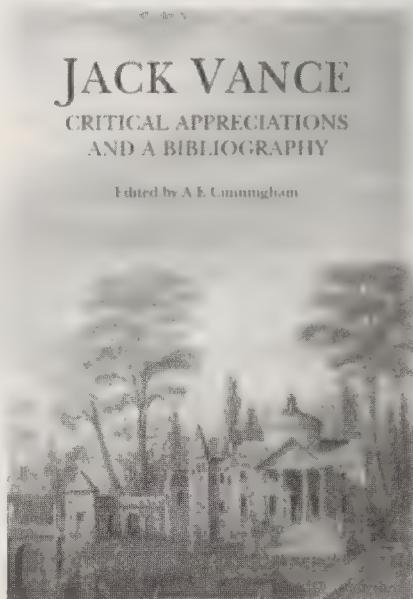
Anyone Seen Junie Moon?", Brian Stableford with the muffled sarcasm of "Ashes and Tombstones," Robert Reed with his predictable teratogenous sports story "Game of the Century," Barry N. Malzberg with his self-parodic "Shiva," and – especially – Brian Aldiss with his dull surrealist parable "An Apollo Asteroid," have performed far better elsewhere than they have here, although their contributions are fair by most standards. A similar air of respectable competence hangs about stories by Tom Purdom, Sarah Zettel and G. David Nordley, journeymen sharing in the mediocrity of the masters. This is a form of democracy, perhaps; but it doesn't belong in an anthology like this. Hartwell has delivered his customary very mixed bag; the sf field should be grateful, but very qualifiedly so.

The shadow falling on the contributors to A. E. Cunningham's anthology *Jack Vance: Critical Appreciations and a Bibliography* (The British Library, £15), is a very different one from Dozois's on Hartwell. To his increasing number of critical admirers, Jack Vance is a major sf writer, and perhaps even a Great Writer full stop; they wish to do him due worship, kneeling in his satirical shadow like respectful acolytes, but how is this to be achieved? Vance's oeuvre is huge, highly variable in quality; and hardly any of his novels is perfect, their flamboyant ironic exoticism almost invariably counterbalanced by lapses of authorial attention or descents into a pulpish plotting that sits ill with such stylistic polish. Vance is the Jane Austen of sf and fantasy, but he lacks her consistency and genius with structure. He deserves much praise, but how (honestly) to praise him?

Paul Rhoads's essay errs on the side of reactionary overstatement of

JACK VANCE CRITICAL APPRECIATIONS AND A BIBLIOGRAPHY

Edited by A. E. Cunningham





Vance's virtues; David Mathew and David Langford attempt to apply conventional (in fact, old-fashioned) thematic critical criteria to Vance and emerge with scant reward beyond affirmations of the obvious; Dan Simmons is not critical enough; and Harlan Ellison, in his Foreword, offers his customary stento-

The worst thing about Mary Gentle's *Ash: A Secret History* (Gollancz, £20 hb/£14.99 tpb) is undoubtedly the cover. While all the important elements in the book are displayed, they don't really cohere in this illustration, and depicting the heroine with her head twisted to an apparently impossible angle does nothing for the plausibility of the story. It would appear that the designer couldn't decide whether to make it a mediaeval detective, or a fantasy, or a science fiction novel, and finally decided on a mish-mash of all three that says nothing about the words inside. But you can't judge a book by its cover!

The second worst is undoubtedly its size. A reader lying on one side, holding this tome in one hand, will significantly increase the size of the forearm muscles in that arm over the period of reading the book. There is also the worry that, near the beginning or ending of the story, there is the chance one might entirely rip the front or back of the book off while trying to support its weight.

In fact, the publisher puffs this book as "probably the biggest fantasy novel ever published in a single volume." At 1112pp, the "biggest single volume" claim is questionable – the 1968 Unwin single-volume *The Lord of the Rings* is 1077pp, close enough to make no never mind, while Peter Hamilton's recent *The Naked God* runs out to a massive 1173pp (yes, it's science fiction, but see below). But while this is probably just a fine example of turning multiple production delays into a selling point (the book was first announced more than two years ago, to appear in two volumes; it has also appeared separately in the USA, reportedly as four volumes), it is doubtful that the publishers are doing Gentle any favours by promoting this book as a fantasy.

Fantasy is characterized by elves and orcs, wizards and witches and warlocks, kings and queens, intrepid princes and enchanted princesses, and swords and sorcery. As such, it most nearly resembles the great myths of the distant past which are recognized as being largely allegorical/archetypal moral tales, and not to be taken literally. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is probably the prototype of such novels. The shame of the entire genre it spawned – the "sub-Tolkien trilogies" – is that it has lost the imag-

rian puffery, to little effect. It is Gene Wolfe, in his straightforward but superbly incisive analysis of *The Dying Earth*, and Tom Shippey, in his well researched investigation of Vance's debt to anthropological thinking, who define Vance's peculiar excellence successfully, and who make Cunningham's volume invaluable for

scholars and readers of Vance. Vance's own autobiographical sketch is a major resource considering his customary reticence; the Bibliography is clear and reasonably thorough; and the book itself is attractively crafted, a trophy for bibliophiles. Not too bad a *festschrift*, considering the shadow.

Nick Gevers

Gentle Battles, but Plausible

Paul Brazier

ination, the breathtaking breadth, and the charm that characterized their original, so that many of the products are little more than cod-mediaeval-with-magic-and-misplaced-royalty stories that frankly are duller to read than they are to describe. However, as *Ash: A Secret History* includes all these elements, it is hardly surprising that the publicists at Gollancz have listed the book as a fantasy, particularly given Gentle's earlier success with *The Golden Witchbreed* and *Ancient Lights*.

But fantasy is more than this. John Crowley's masterful fantasy *Little, Big* carries a proud quotation from Ursula K. LeGuin on its cover – "...all by itself calls for a redefinition of fantasy," because the story features almost none of the then usual trappings of fantasy – sure, it has magic and fairies, but the delicate touch of the author gives even the most prosaic of events in the book such a dream-like quality of enchantment that it comes as little surprise that the novel is one of character and domestic love, and that the nearest any of the characters comes to a weapon is the infamous telephone book listing of the "Noisy Bridge Rod and Gun Club." It is not to be taken literally – how could we take literally the existence of a world contained within ours that is larger than ours, which is how the world of faëry is described in *Little, Big* (pace *Dr Who* fans!). The action takes place, but not in our world, so all that is left is for us to interpret, to compare with our world, to observe the parallels and draw our own conclusions. *Little, Big* opens with Smoky

Barnable walking from the prosaic real world to the faëry world to marry Daily Alice Drinkwater, but as her home, Edgewood, can't be found on any map, Crowley makes it clear in his delightfully oblique manner that it is a spiritual journey that is only available to Smoky, and that for the rest of us, there is no physical link between the world of the story and the world we inhabit: in short, you can't get there from here.

This is a useful formulation: if "you can't get there from here," then the story has to work by association, by parallelism, by recognition of the similarity between the elements of the story and of our own lives. Of course, this is actually true of all fiction, because all fiction is in fact fantasy; it doesn't actually exist in the real world. With realistic fiction, be it war stories, or true love stories, or mainstream literature, there is a sense that, as the setting is real, only the story is made up, and that the story is thus made plausible by its proximity to checkable facts; whereas in a true fantasy, everything is invented. This clear distinction is muffled, blurred and lost sight of beneath the vast mass of bad writing that sprawls across the division, where lack of knowledge is so often scrimmed over by the invention of something usually only barely plausible.

Science fiction exactly spans the division between realistic fiction and true fantasy, on top, but with its roots deeply planted in that vast sprawl of bad writing mentioned above. However, where in realistic fiction it seems the physical link simply exists, so it would be perfectly possible to get there from here if only we had the means; and where, in true fantasy you can't get there from here because there is no physical link, science fiction gives a plausible sense that there is a physical link – fantasies of the future, fantasies of parallel worlds, fantasies of travelling through space to exotic new planets – you can get there from here, or at least you could if you had the right device, and it's only a matter of time before someone invents it. Of course, this includes the future – once someone invents an immortality pill, we will be able to travel to the future as well, but, as I have pointed out in another review in these pages, the true nature and end of science fiction appears to be transcendence, and whether this is by

telepathy, transmogrification, or by a strange device, it remains a defining element of the genre.

This discussion of the nature of the genres we behold is necessary in order to make it quite clear that Mary Gentle's *Ash: A Secret History* sits at the top of the pinnacle of all fiction, not because she is the least sloppy of the inventors of vaguely plausible devices, but because it is the most extraordinarily achieved of stories.

As I understand it, she teaches sword-fighting and is an expert in mediaeval armour, and the blurb to the book says she has a degree in war studies. So far so good; the plainly factual matters of this book – even to there actually being female warriors in mediaeval armies – are so superbly detailed and yet unintrusive as to convince utterly without the reader ever feeling it necessary to check the facts.

The background, of late mediaeval Europe, is also quite plausible; with only a limited knowledge of the period, it seems to me the real history is depicted accurately, and certainly enquiries of other far better informed pundits have only confirmed everything she describes.

Given these two elements, the story of Ash as written here would alone be a rip-roaring fantasy adventure tale of the first rank; but it is so very much more than that. What Mary Gentle has done is taken the tapestry that is history as we know it, identified certain key threads, and woven into it an attached parallel-universe story of such subtlety that it is very difficult to see where the real world ends and her fantastic one begins.

She achieves this by presenting her fiction as if it were a scholarly translation of a surviving mediaeval manuscript, complete with printed-out e-mails interposed between the chapters, as published in our future. So, the experience of opening the book is that the cover, the half title and the title pages all carry the title of Mary Gentle's book, *Ash: A Secret History*. There is then the usual publishing and copyright verso, followed by a dedication, to Richard Evans (a man I never knew, but am becoming more and more convinced was a major influence on fantasy writing during his tenure at Gollancz). Then the book begins – with what is presented as a pasted-in advertisement for an extremely rare copy of a book with a similar title – *Ash: The Lost History of Burgundy*, published in 2001. The advertisement purports to be clipped from *Antiquarian Media Monthly*, Vol. 2, No. 7, July 2006. Thus, despite the fact that the story we are reading is set in the past, the physical book is itself set in the future. This is followed by a title page for *Ash: The Lost History of Burgundy* as written by Pierce Ratcliff Ph.D., pub-



lished by a university press of London and New York whose identity has been scrupulously eradicated throughout the book. Sensibly, a fictional verso for this fictional book has not been included, thus avoiding no end of confusion in future where inattentive librarians might have given the invented book a spurious half-life of its own – and thus for the first time the divide between plausible fiction and actual fact is confidently bridged. We then have a contents pages, a formal introduction followed by a facsimile of a note from the author to his editor, and then Chapter One begins.

Now it would have been simple enough to launch into the narrative and forget about all this scholarly flummery, and indeed the first chapter is presented as straight narrative. Then there is a further insertion of author/editor correspondence where Pierce Ratcliff tells his editor –

I have translated this text into modern colloquial English, especially the dialogue, where I use the educated and slang versions of our language to represent some of the social differences of the period. In addition, mediaeval soldiers were notoriously foul-mouthed. When Davies accurately translates Ash's bad language as 'By Christ's Bones', however, the modern reader feels none of the contemporary shock. Therefore, I have again used modern-day equivalents. I'm afraid she does say 'Fuck' rather a lot.

This is of course a wonderful device for sidestepping all the carpers and anoraks who might otherwise despise the story for being full of anachronisms; but it also makes the story read so well that one might forget the framing device of the modern scholastic translation, so Gentle then inserts scholarly footnotes that break the flow of the narrative just sufficiently to

make sure the reader is paying proper attention, and is not surprised when the author/editor e-mails are inserted between each chapter. And Gentle's writing is equally subtle. Exactly as she manipulates our sense of the setting of this story with the multiple layers of setting, future and past, so the actual narrative moves seamlessly from the standard past third person tense to the present third person for moments of extreme emotion.

It is astounding that the Americans managed to divide this book into four volumes. If I had only had the first part to read I would have been horribly distraught until the rest of the story appeared. This is a continuous narrative, and although it falls naturally into discrete sections, it is no picaresque; as Gene Wolfe points out in *The Shadow of the Torturer*, if you divide the human body into its two major parts, the head and the body, it ceases to function. I would imagine this also to be true of *Ash*, and I certainly would have been very disappointed by the planned two-volume publication in Britain. It has been a long time coming, but this novel, all in one piece, was well worth the wait.

The acid test for any book is this: when you have finished reading it, do you want to read it again? There can be many and several reasons for wanting such a re-reading, but watching a story shade over from historical to fighting fantasy to science fiction before my very eyes is enough to make me want to go back and see how it was done. Beyond that, there is a deep structure to this novel that I have sensed rather than grasped, where the straightforward battle between good and evil is first depicted objectively in the hackneyed way of all such stories, then subverted, then depicted in its real form, and I want to go back and look more closely at that. But most of all, I don't know how much longer I will have to wait for Mary Gentle's next offering, so I will have to wring every ounce of enjoyment from this one.

There have been many books about mediaeval battles, many more about how physical and emotional love are so compelling and interdependent, many feminist warrior fantasies, and much hard science fiction that culminates in transcendence, but only here are all these facets combined so precisely and satisfactorily. It would be a shame for anyone to miss this book because, despite its apparent dry scholarly basis, it is above all else a romp through the author's favourite subjects. In Pierce Ratcliff's voice, Gentle says in the introduction that a book is needed that "does not shrink from the brutality of the mediaeval period, as well as its joyfulness." There is much of brutality – the



BOOKS

REVIEWS

explicit child rape and prostitution early in the book are disturbing, but essential to the development of Ash's character – but there is much joy too, and along with the examina-

The subject of sport does not get much of a look-in when it comes to the work of Rudy Rucker, but owing to the neat sort of serendipitous clash that publishing throws up every once in a while – the sort of coincidence that leads a reviewer to gorge, like a pig at the trough, on a single favourite author for an entire month – an interesting sporting analogy springs to mind... Because of a legal glitch, Rucker is allowed to play for two teams – simultaneously. Although not enamoured of this state of affairs, both teams maintain a dignified silence, only through suggestion revealing that each believes itself to be the instigator of the showman's best displays.

Or something like that. The fact of the matter is, Rudy Rucker, in time for this review, has no fewer than three books out – three chubby fellows – one of which is ably outridered by the three volumes that preceded it (in flash new covers). A feast! Oink. Burp... Oink, oink! I ate it all, and came back for more. Either gourmet or gourmet (because the work is of a uniformly high standard), I ate and ate and ate – until my brain deglutinated in precisely the same fashion that characters in his "Ware" series of novels might melt themselves down in a tub, for the purposes of sexual gratification. (But more about "Ware" later on.) For although it might be true that *sport* plays little part in Rucker's fictional cosmos – a cosmos which is ruthlessly self-referential, in which themes imbricate themselves over one another with the consistency of echoes – the subject of sex comes again and again. As do the ideas of time travel, racial interdependence and the analysis of family breakdown.

Transreal!

Rudy Rucker is a practitioner of what he terms transrealism. And of course, he is at perfect liberty to do so, being also the inventor if not of the word (although that might also be true) then certainly of its incumbent identity. Rudy Rucker is a Transrealist. Wrongly hurled into the cyberpunk bracket (a movement whose initial petrol-bombs were angles of attack, with the emphasis on iconoclasm), Rucker's work is closer in vibe to that of Lewis Carroll than that of William Gibson. "As my own alternative to cyberpunk," Rucker claims early on in *Seek!* (Four Walls Eight Windows, \$35), "I also developed a style of writing which I call *transrealism*. The essence of transrealism is to write about one's real life in fantastic terms." In the hefty companion book, *Gnarl!*

tion of good and evil is one of many telling contrasts here. Altogether, *Ash: The Secret History* is an outstanding achievement from Mary Gentle, so go out and buy it and make it the best-

seller it deserves to be, so that the public who only read bestsellers will finally get the book they ought to have been reading all along.

Paul Brazier

Rudy Rucker and the Transrealistic Nosebleed

David Mathew

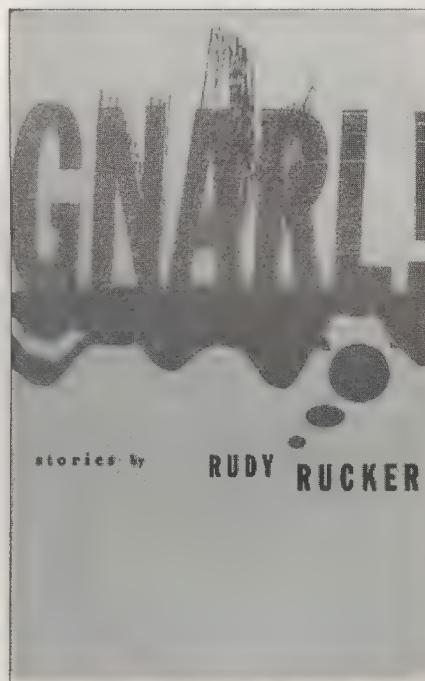
(Four Walls Eight Windows, \$35), a tentative addendum is pasted onto the notes at the back to the story entitled "The Indian Rope Trick Explained." This story is about a more or less miserable family vacation, and Rucker explains: "Transreal" doesn't mean 'true'."

If I may, I'll leave you to discover why the books are so named for yourself. Suffice it to say, perhaps, that the essays in *Seek!* are amazing, are out of this world. Until this month your reviewer had never read a single word of Rucker's non-fiction, although he had based a system of pseudo-hero worship on the "Ware" books and to a lesser extent on *The Master of Space*

and Time and *White Light*... The book is divided into musings on Science, Life and Art. The most brilliant section is the first, the most entertaining the second, and the most inspirational the third. Among the fondness for Pynchon, for Borges, for Poe, for Kerouac, there are photographs and diagrams (classily rendered), and at various junctures we see Rucker battling with personal demons and arm-wrestling with the demands of religion. This, on the subject of arguments with Jerry Falwell's neighbours: "His religion might best be thought of as a kind of nonmalignant tumor. It draws in energy which is expended almost entirely on itself. Jerry Falwell raises money so he can afford bigger shows to raise more money..." As a self-styled evangelist of the electronic ether, he has included a long and fascinating piece on the history of computers...

There are sentences like this: "And soon I found something I was really interested in programming: cellular automata, which are parallel programs that produce rapid-fire self-generating computer-graphics animations." And we get sentences like this, on the use of a favoured piece of ammunition from his word store: "gnarly." "Surfers use it to refer to certain kinds of waves, kids use it to refer to dauntingly strange events of any kind, and I use it to apply to things that have a level of chaos that is tuned right to the boundary between order and disorder. When I write an interactive chaos-based computer-graphics program, what I'm normally doing is seeking gnarl." (Oh, okay, so that's a clue to the titles.) And then? "I've always had a desire to push out to ultimate reality, to discover the Answer, to reach a union with the cosmic One." Or: "A sigh of relief goes up. We're all in this together." (He has just witnessed the culmination of a live sex show.) "What a relief to participate in something so natural and decent in this twisted world. The equipment still works. I feel like I'm in church, a little boy again." And then the arguments with his children. To wit: "Are you kidding me? That stuff went out in the '50s. I didn't march on the Pentagon so my children could be preppy." "You don't know anything, Daddy. You're groovy."

On and blissfully on. It is swiftly apparent that Rucker is no more and no less a composite of conflicting energies than any other writer. Enamoured of chaos and noise, he is a world-beating mathematician and a



lecturer in computer science; as an ardent fan of the Ramones, he is also a besotted family man with a lesioned ego the size of the Californian state he inhabits, and was, furthermore, until 1996, an indolent piss-head and doper. (His structured and strategic withdrawal from drink and weed is mentioned on more than one occasion.) He says: "It's kind of touching how much attitude I used to have. I was pretty desperate to get noticed. To be different... For a long time I embraced the classic notion that drinking and taking drugs is a bohemian identifier, a legitimate path to enlightenment. As I got to be older than Poe and Kerouac ever were, it became all too evident to me that their left-hand path is not a sustainable one. It just ends in tears," as my mother used to say vis-a-vis almost anything... I used to be scared that if I got straight I wouldn't be the same person, that the wild creative part of me would go away. Well, I'm not exactly the same person – but I still feel creative."

At times Rucker comes on like the carnival huckster, or as a mildly embittered *arriviste*. You never know how much is sham and bluster, of course, but it seems heartfelt. He says: "my books seem to be quite popular in Japan, perhaps even more so than in the U.S. I think all my novels are in print in Japan, which still remains an impossible dream for me in the U.S. But I still think my day will come. The trick is to try and have it happen before you die." Quoting Borges on the subject of Melville and Poe: "Vast populations, towering cities, erroneous and clamorous publicity have conspired to make unknown great men one of America's traditions." Sometimes I like to imagine that's a description of me..." Whether he knows it or not, Rudy Rucker is the celebrant of a crunch-time paradox: he wants to be more famous, successful and rich – but does not seem to acknowledge that the very thing that has kept his work sharp (where others have blunted) is an absence of talk shows and residuals and whoredom: an absence, if you like, of unconditional success.

Seek! is the work of an author of rare talent. Far ranging, analeptic and wise, it is a tidy explanation of the prosopography of the 20th century. Rigorously recommended.

Gnarl! is similarly impressive. It's a corpulent store of 36 stories, and Rucker's imprimatur is stamped onto every page... In 566 pages there is scarcely a dud paragraph, let alone a dud tale, although occasionally things seem a trifle jejune or desirous of attention. "Enlightenment Rabies" is a story about vaccination and the regrets of not knowing what you've got till it's gone. "Jumpin' Jack Flash" is a

very early story (written 1976, published 1983) about inter-species sex: see above. "Schrodinger's Cat," as you might imagine, is a story, broadly speaking, about choice: elliptically but memorably it is summed up in the notes as follows: "The seed for this story was a drawing I made for my cheerfully horrified children of a Santa Claus with a thousand heads, answering phone calls from every boy and girl in the world at once." "The Fifty-Seventh Franz Kafka" is bizarre and coolly beautiful. A man is getting ready for his next incarnation.

In Rudy Rucker's short stories, the male narrators exhibit their hara-kiri genius for indiscretion. Unloved and often unlovable men hamfist their ways through strangulated existences – and so much is said with so little. Quote: "Nancy was asleep, avoiding me. I was watching TV. A six-inch butler in there making a pitch for textured napkins. Texture equals romance. I was clean broke, and my new wife had stopped loving me." Towards the end of the volume, and therefore towards the end of Rucker's time travel – bringing things in this chronological volume up to speed – the emphasis is clearly on collaboration. Paul Di Filippo, Marc Laidlaw and Bruce Sterling have all shared bylines with Rucker, and "The Andy Warhol Sandcandle" (with Laidlaw) and "Instability" (Di Filippo) are particularly good. Laidlaw's earlier jam, "Chaos Surfari" (which interestingly but unbelievably was published in *Interzone*) is as ghastly as the pun of its nomer. (At the risk of incurring a lawsuit, if ever a story reeked of alcohol and smoke, this is it!) In its favour, it must be reported all that typographical tosh that marked the story's original appearance has been expunged. So

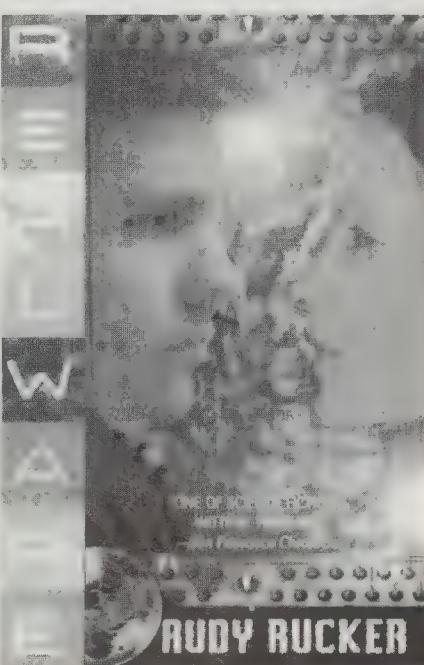
a rare low point – but as I said before, not a dud: just not interesting. Everything else is recommended. And how.

But where is Ware? What is Ware? Up until recently, the most accurate we could be was to call it the Ware Sequence or Series, not really having had any stolidly defendable notion of how many books there would eventually be. Well, now we know: or so we're told... although it wouldn't be a hiding to nothing to gamble that the author will produce a fifth volume – and then a sixth, and so on. But for now let us call it the Ware Tetralogy and keep our eye on the door for a quick escape... This fourth – this *Realware* (Avon/Eos, \$14) – is Rucker's last tumble of the dice when it comes to old friends like Cobb Anderson and Stahn (once Sta-Hi) Mooney. And so that nothing is mislaid, the others are also available as: *Software*, *Wetware* and *Freeware* (all Avon/Eos, \$5). Read them first, I urge you. Not because you need to, but because they are bliss in prose form. As is *Realware*: the end is near, but Rucker forbids such a fact from intruding. Neither a tract of paralyzing lachrymosity, nor a frantic hunt-the-keys session of rabid unprofessionality, the tale is beautifully told, and funny, and sad, and leads the reader through unexpected areas (notably a tropical island!). It remains the case that for this particular reviewer, the first novel is still the best, but nostalgia's eyelashes when fluttered are hard to ignore. I read that book as a very young man, and frankly failed to understand a good deal of it; but the *vibe* I got, the *vibe* I understood.

With *Realware*, matters are dreamier, looser, more soft-focus. As capably monstrous in its plotting as the others, it burns with the irreverence that appealed to me then but impresses me now. There is more going on per page than many authors languidly salute in a chapter. Cobb Anderson is now not so much like Santa Claus as he is like a hang-glider, able to fly and take passengers. The brain-eaters of *Software* have long since vanished, but merge is still present and addiction has its enemy in Rucker with this book. Phil's soon-to-be ex-girlfriend makes a habit of being "completely twisted by the time Phil (gets) home from work"; she is into any goo under the sun (or moon), and merge is a personal fave. And Rucker's family values are still capable of breaking your heart. For example, Phil has real regrets about the way he left his relationship with his father – the father who is killed by the Metamartians.

Quite possibly the most important series of the last two decades of the 1900s.

David Mathew



BOOKS RECEIVED



JULY
2000

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Asimov, Isaac. **The End of Eternity**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07118-4, 189pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1955; Asimov's well-known novel of time-travel.) 20th July 2000.

Baxter, Stephen. **Space: Manifold 2**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225771-8, 455pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the second in the author's ongoing "Manifold" hard-sf sequence; parts of this one first appeared as separate stories in the [sadly] now-defunct U.S. magazine *Science Fiction Age*, and in Peter Crowther's 1999 anthology *Moonshots*.) 7th August 2000.

Baxter, Stephen. **Time: Manifold 1**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651182-1, 456pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1999; first of a trilogy, the publishers billed it last year as "the millennium's last great sf novel"; reviewed by Paul J. McAuley in *Interzone* 148.) 7th August 2000.

Blackman, Malorie. **Dangerous Reality**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-52840-4, 192pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first published in the UK, 1999; on a virtual-

reality theme, this is the first book by this black British author we have seen – although, in the words of a *Times* reviewer, she "is becoming a bit of a national treasure"; she has won awards for such earlier titles as *Hacker* and *Pig-Heart Boy*, and the latter title was adapted for BBC television) 3rd August 2000.

Bulis, Christopher. **Imperial Moon**. "Doctor Who." BBC Worldwide, 0-563-53801-5, 283pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "featuring the Fifth Doctor, Turlough and Kamelion"; the BBC have kindly resumed sending us review copies of this paperback-original series after a nearly two-year gap; this one seems to be in "steampunk" mode: "The year is 1878. Three ships of the British Imperial Spacefleet have just set course for the Moon.") 7th August 2000.

Card, Orson Scott. **Ender's Shadow: Book One of The Shadow Trilogy**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-998-9, 559pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; a retake on the author's Hugo-winning success of 1985, *Ender's Game*.) 3rd August 2000.

Charnas, Suzy McKee. **The Conqueror's Child**. "Book Four of The Holdfast Chronicles." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86946-0, 428pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; a long-delayed conclusion to the feminist sf sequence which began with *Walk to the End of the World* [1974 – William S. Burroughs admired it, as the cover of this book reminds us], *Motherlines* [1978] and *The Furies* [1994].) 7th August 2000.



Cooper, Louise. **The Summer Witch**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-5950-X, 314pp, A-format paperback, cover by Claudio Berni, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; apparently this first came out in a Headline hardcover edition last year, but we never saw it.) 3rd August 2000.

Dick, Philip K. **Dr Bloodmoney**. "SF Masterworks, 32." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-952-X, 304pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1965; this edition contains the 1980 afterword Dick wrote for an American reprint, two years before his premature death; one of the author's best, it comes with a cover commendation from film-maker Terry Gilliam: "For everyone lost in the endlessly multiplying realities of the modern world, remember: Philip K. Dick got their first.") 10th August 2000.

Douglass, Sara. **Sinner: Book One of The Wayfarer Redemption**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648617-7, xiv+638pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kev Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1997; this Australian author's fourth Big Commercial Fantasy, appearing some years late in Britain.) 21st August 2000.

Egan, Greg. **Teranesia**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-864-7, 249pp, A-format paperback, cover by Yasuo Seki, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1999; the most recent novel from one of the world's best sf writers, set on an Indonesian island in the near future; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 147.) 10th August 2000.

Emmerson, Steve. **Casualties of War**. "Doctor Who." BBC Worldwide, 0-563-53805-8, 271pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, it's set at the time of the First World War; the author appears to be a newbie – as the author note puts it: "At 25 years old, a staggeringly handsome man, Steve Emmerson... controls his magnificent empire from a cupboard under the stairs in his mum's council house in South Croydon, and never, ever, ever tells lies.") 4th September 2000.

Erikson, Steven. **Deadhouse Gates: A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04622-6, xix+684pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; we have already listed this here as a hardcover, from a proof copy received some months earlier [to which we mistakenly assigned the £10.99 trade-paperback price]; second of a promised ten-volume sequence; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 159.) 7th September 2000.

Foster, Alan Dean. *Dirge: Book Two of the Founding of the Commonwealth*. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41864-6, 310pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the latest in the "Humanx Commonwealth" series of adventures which began with Foster's first published novel, *The Tar-Aiym Krang*, in 1972, and now stretches to over 20 volumes in various sub-series; this one appears to be a follow-up to a novel called *Phylogenesis*, which we don't recall seeing.) Late entry: 6th June publication, received in July 2000.

Harlan, Thomas. *The Shadow of Ararat*. "Book One of *The Oath of Empire*." Tor, ISBN 0-812-59009-0, 793pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Hickman, \$6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in 1999; we received a review copy of the sequel, *The Gate of Fire*, a couple of months ago, and at that time commented that we didn't recall seeing [or hearing of] the first volume; well, here is a reprint of the first; although Big Commercial Fantasy, with magic, it's set in a quasi-science-fictional alternative timeline where Rome did not fall; it carries a back-cover commendation by Ellen Kushner, and Locus described it as "an extraordinary debut"; the author is a former games-designer.) Late entry: May publication, received in July 2000.

Harrison, M. John. *The Centauri Device*. "SF Masterworks, 31." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-997-X, 205pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1974; although it won't be to everyone's taste, this must be the most stylish space-opera adventure romp ever written; rumour has it that the author wouldn't allow it to be reprinted for many years, but it seems he has now relented; it's still well worth reading.) 13th July 2000.

Harrison, M. John. *Viriconium*. "Fantasy Masterworks, 7." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-995-3, 563pp, B-format paperback, cover by Albert Godwin, £7.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; the four constituent books [the contents of which are here rearranged], *The Pastel City*, *A Storm of Wings*, *In Viriconium* and *Viriconium Nights*, were originally published in the UK, 1971, 1980, 1982 and 1985; somewhat in the vein of Jack Vance's "Dying Earth" tales, but much more British in tone, these are decidedly quirky fantasies.) 13th July 2000.

Hartwell, David G., ed. *Year's Best SF 5*. HarperCollins/Eos, ISBN 0-06-102054-0, xv+494pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 25 stories selected from 1999's output – by Brian Aldiss, Stephen Baxter, Chris Beckett, Michael Bishop, Terry Bisson, Cory Doctorow, Greg Egan, Mary Soon Lee, Barry Malzberg, Tom Purdom, Robert Reed, Kim Stanley Robin-

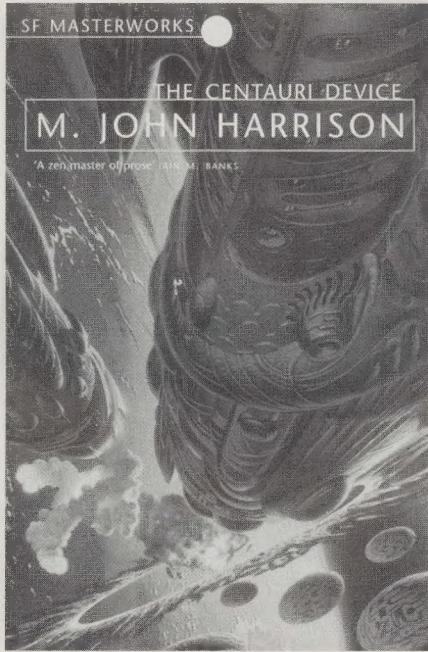
son, Geoff Ryman, Robert J. Sawyer, Brian Stableford, Lucy Sussex, Michael Swanwick, Gene Wolfe, Sarah Zettel and others; reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 159; no less than five of the stories are from *Interzone*: those by Beckett, Egan, Mary Soon Lee and Ryman, plus Hiroe Suga's "Freckled Figure" [translated from the Japanese]; well done, everybody.) Late entry: June publication, received in July 2000.

Haydon, Elizabeth. *Rhapsody: Child of Blood*. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-990-2, 609pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; yet another BCF [Big Commercial Fantasy] debut by a new American writer, it comes commended by Piers Anthony, Anne McCaffrey and others.) 1st August 2000.

Herbert, Frank. *The Dosadi Experiment*. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-944-9, 336pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1977; one of the late Frank Herbert's more interesting non-"*Dune*" sf novels.) 13th July 2000.

Herbert, Frank, and Bill Ransom. *The Jesus Incident*. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-945-7, 405pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1979; a belated sequel to Herbert's *Destination: Void* [1966].) 13th July 2000.

Huberman, Carl. *Kingdom Come*. Pan, ISBN 0-330-36776-5, 451pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Sherrard, £5.99. (Sf thriller, first edition; basically a crime/suspense novel, it appears to be set against the near-future background of an impending asteroid strike on America; we were sent an earlier sf-tinged thriller by this writer, *Welcome to the 51st State*, in 1999;



despite his American-sounding name, and the U.S. settings he employs, Huberman seems to be British, and has written a number of similar thrillers.) 11th August 2000.

Hyatt, John. *Navigating the Terror*. Ellipsis [2 Rufus St., London N1 6PE], 1-899858-66-0, 270pp, small-format trade paperback, £10. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by a British artist and musician who is about 40 years old and works at Manchester Metropolitan University; it's "set in a future where humans co-exist with digital replicants of themselves, Data Humans, otherwise known as uploads.") July 2000.

Jacoby, Kate. *Black Eagle Rising: Third Book of Elita*. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06526-5, 457pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Sullivan, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Kate Jacoby" is a pseudonym of Australian author Tracey O'Phant.) 20th July 2000.

Kubin, Alfred. *The Other Side*. Translated by Mike Mitchell. Illustrated by the author. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-69-0, 249pp, B-format paperback, cover by the author, £9.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1908 [according to Dedalus; other sources say 1909]; first edition in this new English-language translation [although there was an earlier American one (1967), reprinted in the UK by Penguin Books in the 1970s]; Kubin [1877-1959] was a well-known Austrian artist of the fantastic, and this, his only novel, has long been regarded as a minor classic; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in this issue of *Interzone*.) 17th August 2000.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. *Owl-sight*. Illustrated by Dixon. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-861-2, 389pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; sequel to *Owlflight*, and part of the larger "Valdemar" series.) 13th July 2000.

Lofficier, Jean-Marc and Randy. *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction: A Guide to Cinema, Television, Radio, Animation, Comic Books and Literature*. Foreword by Stephen R. Bissette. McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0596-1, xi+787pp, trade paperback, \$95 [USA], £76 [UK]. (Illustrated guide to "le fantastique" in French popular culture; first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns, Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; this massive soft-cover tome, with its double-columned pages crammed with interesting information and opinion, must be the largest book that McFarland have ever sent us for review; it's of about the same heft as Pierre Versins's French-language *Encyclopédie de l'Utopie*, des



Voyages Extraordinaires et de la Science-Fiction [1972] – and it probably derives a good deal of its material from there too; the Lofficiers are obviously Franco-phone, but live in the USA; hitherto they have been best-known for books on fantastic TV and cinema; interestingly, though, this new work deals far more with the written word than with the audio-visual media – just under 300 pages are devoted to films, comics, etc., while nearly 500 pages are about print fiction, providing what must be the most exhaustive listing and description in English of French writers, books, magazines, etc., falling into the area of the fantastic [i.e. horror, exotic adventure, fantasy and sf, in all their forms]; it defines "French" to mean anything in the French language, thus including Belgian writers, French-Canadians, etc; one might quibble with the book's layout, but it's a goldmine of information, highly recommended to anyone with an interest in French pop-fic.) *In the USA, September 2000; in the UK, October 2000.*

McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. *Acorna's People: The Further Adventures of the Unicorn Girl.* HarperTorch, ISBN 0-06-105983-8, 399pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Ennis, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this is probably a sharecrop – i.e. written by Scarborough with McCaffrey's indulgence.) *July 2000.*

McKenna, Juliet E. *The Gambler's Fortune: The Third Tale of Einarinn.* Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-989-X, 517pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *17th August 2000.*

MacLeod, Ken. *The Sky Road.* Tor, ISBN 0-312-87335-2, 291pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Salwowski, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1999; winner of the British SF Association Award as best novel of the year; this is the first American edition, and comes with praise from Kim Stanley Robinson: "Ken MacLeod's novels are fast, funny, and sophisticated... He is writing revolutionary sf.") *23rd August 2000.*

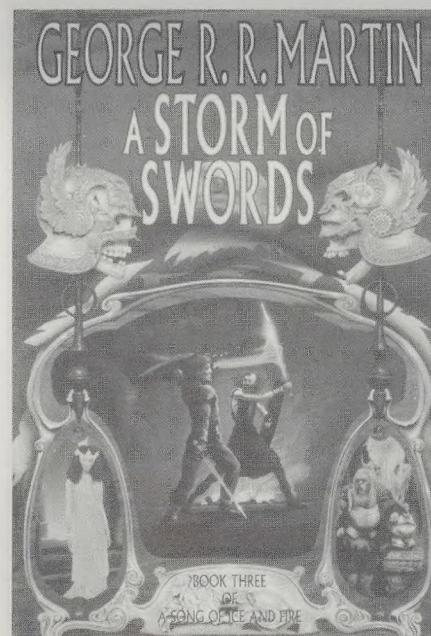
Martin, George R. R. *A Storm of Swords: Book Three of A Song of Ice and Fire.* Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224586-8, 973pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; another BCF bonecrusher, but better-written than most, it follows nearly two years after the previous volume in the series, *A Clash of Kings* – so at least Martin isn't rushing them out in the way that some authors do; it's dedicated: "For Phyllis, who made me put the dragons in.") *21st August 2000.*

May, Julian. *Orion Arm: An Adventure of the Rampart Worlds.* Voyager, ISBN

0-00-648214-7, 393pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; the subtitle on the cover reads "The Rampart Worlds: Book 2.") *17th July 2000.*

Miller, Walter M., Jr. *The Best of Walter M. Miller, Jr.* "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07119-2, viii+472pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1980; the late Walter Miller wrote very little after the end of the 1950s – this volume is basically his two collections of stories from that decade, *Conditionally Human* [1962] and *The View from the Stars* [1964], with a couple of other old stories added; recommended, despite its age.) *20th July 2000.*

Morgner, Irmtraud. *The Life and Adventures of Trobadora Beatrice, as Chronicled by Her Minstrel Laura: A Novel in Thirteen Books and Seven Intermezzos.* Translated by Jeanette Clausen. Introduction by Jeanette Clausen and Silke von der Emde. "European Women Writers Series." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880484, Lincoln, NE 68588-0484, USA], ISBN 0-8032-8260-5, xvii+492pp, trade paperback, £16.95. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1974; this is the American first English-language edition of 2000 with a UK price and publication date added – distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; the publishers tell us that Irmtraud Morgner [1933-1990] was "one of the most innovative and witty feminist writers to emerge from the German Democratic Republic"; the story concerns the awakening, "after an eight-hundred-year sleep," of a medieval poetess, Beatrice de Dia, who then proceeds to explore the Europe of 1968.) *August 2000.*



Morris, Jonathan. *Festival of Death.* "Doctor Who." BBC Worldwide, 0-563-53803-1, 281pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "featuring the Fourth Doctor, Romana and K9"; the author appears to be new, and to be aged 26.) *4th September 2000.*

Newman, Kim. *Life's Lottery: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Book.* Pocket, ISBN 0-671-01597-4, 615pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Interactive novel, first published in the UK, 1999; cleverly cast in the form of a choose-you-own-adventure yarn for grownups, it may well have horror-fiction elements; reviewed by Tim Robins in *Interzone* 148.) *7th August 2000.*

Olton, Bert. *Arthurian Legends on Film and Television.* McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0718-2, ix+341pp, hardcover, \$39.95. (Illustrated, annotated filmography of Arthurian fantasy movies and TV series; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available shortly in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the coverage is very comprehensive, including not only all the explicitly Arthurian films like *Knights of the Round Table*, *Camelot* and *Excalibur*, but the disguisedly so – such as the *Star Wars* trilogy, or the Robert Redford baseball movie, *The Natural*; another nicely-produced volume from McFarland, in their larger format with pictorial cover.) *August 2000.*

Richards, Justin. *The Burning.* "Doctor Who." BBC Worldwide, 0-563-53812-0, 240pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, like the Christopher Bulis title [see above], this one is set in the late 19th century; the author is Consultant Editor of the BBC Doctor Who books series.) *3rd August 2000.*

Richardson, Maurice. *The Exploits of Engelbrecht: Abstracted from the Chronicles of the Surrealist Sportsman's Club.* Illustrated by James Boswell, Ronald Searle and Gerard Hoffnung. Introduction by James Cawthorn. Afterword by Michael Moorcock. Savoy [466 Wilmslow Rd., Withington, Manchester M20 3BW], ISBN 0-86130-107-2, xiv+194pp, hardcover, cover by Boswell [coloured by Kris Guido], £20. (Humorous fantasy collection, first published in the UK, 1950; last reprinted in a small paperback edition in 1977, and now made available in hardcover for the first time in 50 years, this is one of the "lost" classics of British fantasy; it consists of a series of stories that Richardson [1907-1978] first contributed to *Lilliput* magazine in the late 1940s, here reproduced with the original magazine illustrations; endorsed by J. G. Ballard, as well as by Moorcock and

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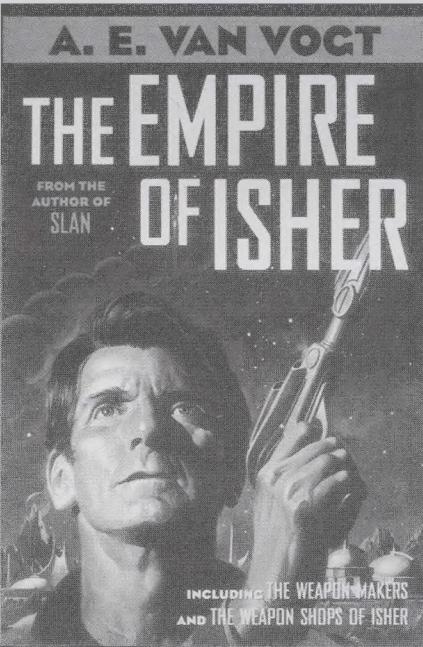
Cawthorn, this edition also contains an extra non-Engelbrecht short fantasy entitled "Unquiet Wedding"; all very funny, quirky and inventive, unlike anything else [although Ballard fans please note: this book may be one of the imaginative sources of his collection *Vermilion Sands*.] 5th August 2000.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn, and Dean Wesley Smith. **X-Men.** "Now a major blockbuster from Twentieth Century Fox." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-44095-1, 239pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf/fantasy movie novelization, first edition; based on the film script by Christopher McQuarrie and Ed Solomon, which in turn is based on a Marvel Comics comic-book series.) Late entry: 6th June publication, received in July 2000.

Scott, Martin. **Thraxas and the Elvish Isles.** "The BIGGEST star of pulp fantasy." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-002-4, 249pp, A-format paperback, cover by Julian Gibson and Paul Young, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the fourth in this series of paperback originals, the first three of which – *Thraxas, Thraxas and the Warrior Monks* and *Thraxas at the Races* – all came out close together in 1999; "Martin Scott," it is now revealed, is a pseudonym of Martin Millar, who wrote the movie novelization *Tank Girl* [1995] plus a number of other things; a quote on the front cover, from SFX magazine, describes the series' obese protagonist, Thraxas, as "a pulp fiction hero par excellence"; that's two mentions of "pulp" in the book's packaging – the publishers seem keen to promote it that way; but then there's a sense in which all paperback-original series fiction [a form now rarer than it used to be, at least in Britain] may be regarded as "pulp fiction" – or, at any rate, as a sort of continuation of the pulp-magazine tradition.) 3rd August 2000.

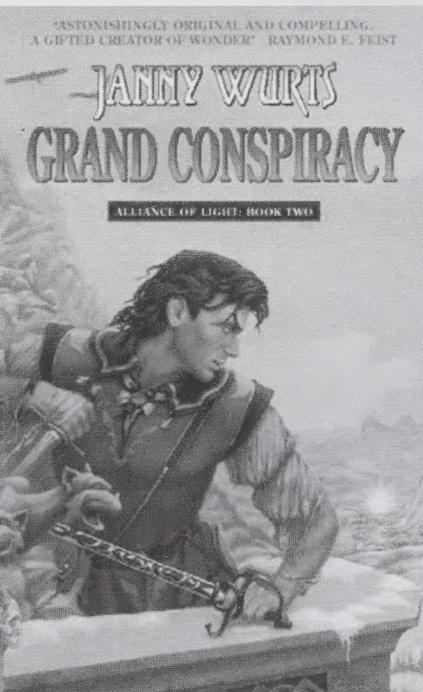
Sladek, John. **The Reproductive System.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07116-8, 192pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1968; the late John Sladek's debut sf satire – still very funny and relevant after all these years; published in the USA as *Mechasm* [but long out of print there].) 20th July 2000.

Stableford, Brian. **Year Zero.** Illustrated by Tim Denton. Sarob Press ["Brynderwen," 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Wales CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-10-3, 221pp, hardcover, cover by Denton, £22.50. (Humorous sf/horror "fix-up" novel, first edition; limited to 300 copies; it consists of a cycle of stories, which add up to a novel, about the adventures of an everyday woman called Molly who encounters space-aliens and many other strange entities and phenomena; the first three stories appeared in *Interzone*, under the pseudonym "Francis



Amery"; the remainder of the book is previously unpublished; recommended as an inventive Stablefordian jeu d'esprit for the Millennium.) July 2000.

Stasheff, Christopher. **The Feline Wizard: Book VIII in A Wizard in Rhyme.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39245-0, 376pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the previous book in this Del Rey series, which we seem to have missed, was called *The Crusading Wizard*, and it followed *The Haunted Wizard* [January 2000] – that's three titles so far this year, not counting the same author's other [hardcover] series from Tor Books; although, like Piers Anthony's "Xanth" series, they are not labelled "young-adult," all these novels seem



to be pitched, so far as we can judge, at the same sort of early-teenage readership.) Late entry: 6th June publication, received in July 2000.

Tepper, Sheri S. **The Awakeners: Northshore & Southshore.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648271-6, 240+250pp, A-format paperback, cover by James C. Christensen, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA as two separate volumes, *Northshore* [1986] and *Southshore* [1987]; the statement on the back cover, that this is the work's "first time in a single volume," is far from being the truth: Bantam Press and Corgi Books did previous one-volume editions in the UK in 1988 and 1989.) 7th August 2000.

Thomas, Jeffrey. **Punktown.** The Ministry of Whimsy Press [PO Box 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315, USA], ISBN 0-926902-62-8, 118pp, trade paperback, cover by H. E. Fassl, \$11.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; nine stories, drawn from small-press magazines; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in this issue of *Interzone*.) Late entry: 15th June publication, received in July 2000.

Vance, Jack. **Big Planet.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07117-6, 218pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1957; this is the restored magazine text [*Startling Stories*, September 1952], as reprinted in the USA [1978], of what is generally regarded as the best of Vance's early planetary romances.) 20th July 2000.

Van Vogt, A. E. **The Empire of Isher.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-87500-2, 352pp, trade paperback, cover by Vincent di Fate, \$14.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition in this form; it contains the linked "fix-up" novels *The Weapon Shops of Isher* [1951] and *The Weapon Makers* [1952], both based on material first published in Astounding SF during the 1940s; as we said of an earlier Van Vogt reprint in the Tor series, this is good, slam-bang, pulp-magazine adventure sf of its period – but no more than that; don't take the book's jostling words of praise from luminaries of the field such as Gardner Dozois and David Hartwell too seriously; Barry Malzberg gets it about right in the briefest of the encomia: "Ah, careless, rapturous Van Vogt!") 13th July 2000.

Wurts, Janny. **Grand Conspiracy: The Wars of Light and Shadow, Volume 5: Second Book of The Alliance of Light.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710222-4, 643pp, A-format paperback, cover by the author, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; typical Big Commercial Fantasy, perhaps distinguished from the run-of-the-mill by the fact that the author is her own [very competent] cover artist.) 21st August 2000.



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